

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

Easter is over, and yet it is not. Easter is too big for just one Sunday. We celebrate it for a week of Sundays. For seven weeks we will proclaim Christ is risen! Alleluia! Actually, it's even bigger than that. The resurrection of Jesus is why we gather together all year round on the first day of the week. I know ... we call Saturday and Sunday "the weekend," but you know that Saturday is the end of the week. Sunday begins a new week. Sunday is the first day of the week.

And so, every Sunday we gather here at church to meet the risen Lord Jesus, for each Sunday Jesus comes to be with us, to proclaim peace to us, to show us His wounds, to send us forth with repentance and forgiveness of sins on our lips, just as on the first day of the week He appeared to the disciples to do the same.

Now you recall what has happened thus far on this momentous day. The women had gone to the tomb early that morning. The angel told them the marvelous news: "*you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said*" (Matt. 28:5-6). They ran to the disciples to report what they had been told. Peter and John ran to confirm it, and found the tomb was indeed empty, the burial cloths neatly folded where Jesus had lain. Jesus showed Himself to Mary Magdalene and to Peter. And then two others who had been walking on the road to Emmaus reported to the disciples that they had seen Jesus—more on that next week.

So, it's the evening of the day of resurrection, and the disciples were hunkered down behind locked doors because they were afraid the Jews might do the same thing to them as Jesus' followers. And they really barricaded themselves in; they weren't just behind one locked door but locked doors plural. But locked doors were no more a deterrent to the risen Jesus than the closed and sealed tomb was. Jesus came and stood in the midst of the disciples.

Immediately, Jesus spoke to them: "*Peace be with you.*" And then He showed them the wounds in His hands and side. This was no ghostly apparition. This was Jesus Christ the crucified in the flesh, now resurrected, standing in their midst.

People talk today about the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Law schools have staged brief mock incidents with a perpetrator brandishing a weapon and threatening the professor, and afterward asking the students to write down their recollections. And they're often inaccurate and varied. But Jesus' appearance to the disciples wasn't some brief and traumatic encounter with Him. So on what eyewitness testimony exactly are these skeptics trying to raise doubts? On Jesus' crucifixion? On the Romans efficiency at killing people? Or their effectiveness at terrorizing their conquered peoples with their brutality? Or maybe on Jesus' resurrection itself? That the tomb was empty? That the disciples are trustworthy? Therefore, that the risen Jesus actually appeared to them?

Thomas was such a skeptic in our Gospel. He wasn't there when Jesus appeared on Easter evening. And what He disbelieved was the disciples' testimony: "*We have seen the Lord.*" But He didn't seek proof of Jesus' resurrection. He wanted proof that the one they saw was in fact the Crucified. The other disciples got to see the wounds. Thomas wanted to see them for himself. Jesus, of course, accommodated Thomas eight days later. He appeared again and showed Thomas especially the prints of the nails in His hands, and the gash in His side. Thomas believed and confessed "*My Lord and my God,*" and Thomas is now also counted among the eye witnesses of the resurrection.

These eye witness testimonies are surely significant to our Christian hope. They bear witness to what Paul calls the things "*of first importance,*" and they are "*that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures*" (1 Cor. 15:3-4). But more than that, Paul highlights the importance of the eyewitness testimonies, for, he says, Jesus "*appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*"—that last appearance is what we have recounted in our Gospel today. Again, they buttress our Christian hope. Paul goes on: "*if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ... If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep*" (1 Cor. 15:14, 19-20).

So the risen Jesus appeared to His disciples and proclaimed peace to them. And Jesus' word is Divine; it is performative. It does what He says. When Jesus proclaims peace, He also bestows it. Indeed, what Jesus here delivers to His disciples is what His passion and death earned. The sacrifice of atonement was finished. God and man are "at one" again, reconciled, peace restored, as St. Paul wrote: "*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them*" (2 Cor. 5:19). Or again: "*through [Christ, God was pleased] to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross*" (Col. 1:20).

But as Luther taught, the forgiveness that Jesus earned by His cross is not given there. Rather it is given us by the Word preached and the Sacraments administered (Luther, *LW*40:213). That's why the risen Jesus stood there among His disciples on this Easter evening—to give forgiveness of sins so that peace may follow, for as we heard St. Paul say, our peace with God comes from Him not "*counting [our] trespasses against [us].*" Yes, "*Christ died for our sins*" on the cross. "*It is finished*" (John 19:30). But Paul also tells us, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, "*[we] are still in [our] sins*" (1 Cor. 15:17). Jesus' resurrection is the validation of the saving power of His cross.

Thus, on the day of His resurrection, Jesus appeared to His disciples, bestowed the peace of God upon them, proved He was Christ the crucified, gave a second helping of peace, and sent them forth with forgiveness of sins on their tongues.

Jesus also sends out His church with the words we heard today. Surely, proclaim the message foretold in Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms, now confirmed by the apostles and evangelists, “*that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead.*” But preach also “*repentance for the forgiveness of sins ...in [Jesus’] name to all nations ...*” (Luke 24:46-47). Repentance is also in view when we’re talking forgiveness. Thus, we hear St. Peter preach today not only that “*the God of our fathers raised Jesus,*” and “*exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior,*” but also that God did it “*to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*”

And you remember your catechism explains Jesus’ words, saying that He sends out His church on earth forgiving “the sins of repentant sinners,” and also withholding “forgiveness from the unrepentant as long as they do not repent” (Small Catechism, Office of the Keys).

And forgiveness is the point, not just “getting something off your chest.” Luther says that we confess “for the sake of obtaining the Absolution,” that is, forgiveness (A Brief Exhortation to Confession, 21). Again, Luther says, “Christ Himself placed His Absolution into the hands of His Christian people with the command that they should absolve one another of their sins” (A Brief Exhortation, 14), echoing what St. Paul teaches: forgive “*each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive*” (Col. 3:13).

And these are the efficacious signs—God’s word and Sacraments—that Jesus gives to His church to bestow this forgiveness and with it peace. Many preachers conclude their preaching with Paul’s bestowal of peace: “*the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding ...*” (Phil. 4:7); the post-baptismal prayer acknowledges the forgiveness given in baptism, and concludes “Peace be with you”; individual absolution concludes with the blessing “Go in peace”; the Lord’s Supper “given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins” concludes with “Depart in peace,” and one post-communion collect acknowledges both the “pardon and peace” given us in the Sacrament.

Yes, these are the ongoing signs Jesus gives to His church, that we may know the pardon and peace of Christ crucified and risen, and ultimately that we may be strengthened in our faith “*that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing [we] may have life in his name.*” Grant these to us, Lord, and send us forth ...

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Christ is risen! Alleluia!