

In the name of ✠ Jesus!

The church is at war. The church on earth is called the church militant, under assault by the forces of evil, ourselves Christian soldiers, armored up, weapons in hand, marching as to war, ourselves assailing the gates of hell. It's nice to know that Jesus lives, the victory's won, as we go forth, but we know there are still injuries and casualties. Pope Francis called the Church a field hospital, a place for people to go to have wounds healed. Let me illustrate.

Last week at school, I did the devotions. You bet we did the Easter acclamation. Even the little ones got it; Bill Wallschlaeger, who reads with the students, was with the kindergarteners later in the week, and he asked them, "*What would you say if I said, 'He is risen!'*?" And they all jumped up and exclaimed, "*He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*" The things of the kingdom revealed to the little ones. On the other hand, after chapel service on Thursday, one of our teachers came up to me and asked if I had a bit of time after chapel. One of our students was having some difficulties. Of course, I did. We found a quiet place to sit down and talk.

I found out he was having a crisis of faith. He was having doubts. Now he was a middle schooler, not one of the little ones that Bill gets to have snuggle up to him as he is reading to them. You might think it's odd—someone at that age having these doubts, this crisis of faith. We always talk about our worries for our children as they go off to college. And surely, our young people are challenged in their faith in college. But the fact is, by that time, many of them are "already gone," as the title of a book by Ken Ham states it—high school, middle school, and even some in elementary school, children baptized, raised in church, going through or having gone through catechesis, becoming unbelievers.

This young person wasn't "already gone," but was longing perhaps for the time in the not too distant past when his faith was unquestioned—the faith of a child, the faith that so easily hears the good news that Jesus has risen from the dead and believes it, and is ready to jump up and shout, "*He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!*" That's why, I think, Jesus tells us that you must turn and become like children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, and again, that you must humble yourself like a child to be great in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3-4).

It's hard to move into adulthood and be a believer. You keep learning more, you've experienced more, and that just brings up more questions. Indeed, I wonder how many adults here haven't had some doubts, perhaps even your own crises of faith.

I certainly have, and we're in good company—apostolic company. We hear today of Thomas and his crisis of faith, and in fact, the Bible tells us that all the disciples struggled with their doubts about Jesus' resurrection. And it is rather unbelievable, isn't it? Resurrection? Come on! Have you ever seen one? Doubts are understandable. But let's also be clear: these doubts are sin. They arise out of a

disbelieving heart, a heart that will not listen to Jesus' word. And there is no greater sin: "*Whoever does not believe is condemned already.*"

Now Jesus had appeared to the other disciples, our text says, and talked to them. He had showed them His hands and feet. "*Touch me,*" He said, and that steeled their faith. It's not surprising, I think, that Thomas wanted the same opportunity. "*I want to stick my finger in His wounds; I want to put my hand in His side. Your testimony is not enough.*" You see, it wasn't just that Thomas hadn't listened to Jesus' word; he also rejected the other disciples' message—their eyewitness testimony.

Well, we know that Jesus did appear to Thomas—8 days later—not condemning, but forgiving. He appeared as One who is able to sympathize with human weaknesses. Jesus appeared to Thomas along with the other disciples with the same words on His mouth: "*Peace be with you.*" He spoke to Thomas especially and showed Thomas His wounded hands and side. And He called on Thomas to stop disbelieving, and believe.

Those last words were Jesus' call to Thomas to repent, with the result that, Thomas confessed: "*My Lord and my God.*" No longer disbelieving but believing. They are his words to us, too. Repent! Believe the eyewitness testimony. "*Blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed.*" Indeed, the Holy Spirit through the evangelist John preserved these words for us "*so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*"

This is the way I sought to talk with this middle schooler, as well, as one who was able to sympathize with him because I have experienced similar doubts, not condemning but with words of peace—like Jesus with Thomas and the other disciples: "*Peace be with you,*"—with words of absolution: "*You are forgiven!*" Yes, this sin, your sins have been atoned for by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ the righteous. "*The blood of Jesus, God's Son, does cleanse us from all our sins.*" He is "*faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*"

Which brings me to a second illustration of the battles we are in as the church militant, what our attitude must be, and what our weapon must be as we march as to war. Our attitude must be one of gentleness and humility. Over and over again, the Scriptures call for us bear one another's burdens, and do so with a "*spirit of gentleness.*" And the weapon? We would be right to say with St. Paul, "*the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.*" But what word is that especially?

I submit to you, it is a word of forgiveness. The church is a forgiveness place. It's not a place for people to parade around like they're perfect. It's not a place where we give thanks to God because we're so much better than those sinners out there. It's not a place to abuse others or discriminate against them because they're

not as pious as we are—because they're sinners and we are not. *"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."*

Given all the brouhaha over Indiana's Religious Freedom Restoration Act in the past couple of weeks, you might think that's what Christianity is all about. That's the way it is portrayed in the press; that's the way it comes off. Christians want a *"license to discriminate,"* we are led to believe. Bible-believing Christians, like us, are nothing but hard-hearted Pharisees, just looking for someone to look down our noses on and assert our superiority.

Of course, anyone with a bit of knowledge about the Bible knows that it condemns such behavior. If that's what people associate with the Church, no wonder many people claim to be against organized religion these days—especially, they say, the millennial generation. The fact is, we need to do a better job of communicating what the Church is really about, that field hospital, cleansing and binding wounds. It's about poor, miserable sinners gathering together to be washed with water and the word and be cleansed of our sins; it's about sinners gathering together to confess our wretched state and to hear words of absolution—the words Christ sent His church with: *"as the Father has sent me, even so, I am sending you ... if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them"*; it's about repentant sinners gathering at the table to eat and drink their forgiveness at the Supper Christ instituted for this very purpose.

The church is a forgiveness place, but that does not mean that she does not also identify sin, condemn it, and call people to repentance. She certainly does, and what she identifies as sin is what the Bible says is sin. Neither church leaders nor churches have the right to *"take [any particular sin] off the sin list,"* as a gay activist suggested with regard to homosexuality. What kind of a field hospital would the Church be if she said to the wounded, you have no wounds? What quicker way would there be to change the character of the church than to make sin "not sin"? No need of binding up. No need for forgiveness. No need of salvation. No need of Christ.

No, the Church is no place to parade our righteousness, but to be forgiven. The Church is a place to meet our Lord, crucified for us, sacrificed for the world, hands and feet and side wounded for our transgression, body bruised for our iniquity. The Church is a place for us to gather to touch His resurrected body still wounded, with blood still pouring from His pierced side—to touch Him not with fingers in the mark of the nails or a hand in His side, but with our mouths, eating and drinking His body and blood. And this, so that, like Thomas, you may be reassured in your faith, and you may confess of Jesus, *"My Lord and my God."* That you may know that His wounds have healed yours, that living in Him, You live in the forgiveness of sins. God grant it for the sake of Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.