

Sunday, April 19, 2020
Second Sunday of Easter

First Reading: Acts 2:14a, 22-32

After the Holy Spirit comes to the apostles on Pentecost, Peter preaches the gospel to the gathered crowd. He tells them that Jesus, who obediently went to his death according to God's plan, was raised from the dead by God. Finally, he appeals to scripture, quoting Psalm 16:8-11, to show that Jesus is the Messiah: though crucified, the risen Jesus is now enthroned.

^{14a}Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed [the crowd], ²²"You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—²³this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. ²⁴But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. ²⁵For David says concerning him,

'I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
²⁶therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.

²⁷For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

²⁸You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.'

²⁹"Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. ³⁰Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

'He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.'

³²This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses."

Psalm: Psalm 16

¹Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you;
I have said to the LORD, "You are my Lord, my good above all other."
²**All my delight is in the godly that are in the land,
upon those who are noble among the people.**
³But those who run after other gods
shall have their troubles multiplied.
⁴**I will not pour out drink offerings to such gods,
never take their names up on my lips. R**
⁵O LORD, you are my portion and my cup;
it is you who uphold me.
⁶**My boundaries enclose a pleasant land;
indeed, I have a rich inheritance.**
⁷I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel;
my heart teaches me night after night.
⁸**I have set the LORD al-ways before me;
because God is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken. R**
⁹My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices;
my body also shall rest in hope.
¹⁰**For you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor let your holy one see the pit.**
¹¹You will show me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are
pleasures forevermore. R

Second Reading: 1 Peter 1:3-9

This epistle was written to encourage Christians experiencing hardships and suffering because of their faith in Christ. The letter opens by blessing God for the living hope we have through Christ's resurrection even amid difficult circumstances and surroundings.

³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, ⁵who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, ⁷so that the genuineness of your faith—being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire—may be found

to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. ⁸Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, ⁹for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

Gospel: John 20:19-31

The risen Jesus appears to his disciples, offering them a benediction, a commission, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. But one of their number is missing, and his unbelief prompts another visit from the Lord.

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Peace and Easter blessings to you, from the South Dakota Synod! I am Pastor Jonathan Steiner, your Director for Evangelical Mission (DEM) and Associate to the Bishop for Stewardship and Outreach. As a gift to you and a break for your pastor after a rather interesting Holy Week, I am pleased and honored to bring you God's Word. Please pray with me as we begin.

Holy and living God, come and be among us today. Open our eyes, our ears, and our hearts to your Word, that we may have faith and the peace that you promise. In Jesus' most holy name we pray, amen.

In Peter's address to the crowd in Acts, we are told that we are all witnesses. As people who have known and seen God, we are called to go and tell the story. We're called to share our own stories of God's love and mercy in our lives. We're called to tell how Christ means the world to us, and how the Holy Spirit makes a difference in our lives, here and now.

Our Gospel reading today is striking for a number of reasons. Jesus shows up to the disciples in a locked room, and promises them peace again, and again, and again. Three times, Jesus offers that blessing, "peace be with you" in our story, in a time when things are not peaceful for Thomas and the disciples.

Here in this locked room, the disciples have shut themselves away because they are afraid. They're worried that they might be next, that the mob might come for them, that they might suffer in the same way that Jesus did. They can't go out, because their lives may be at risk. It is into THAT situation that Jesus shows up and says, "peace be with you" three times.

And poor "Doubting Thomas," the disciple who wasn't there. I think he gets a bad name for doing what everyone else does. I often think that any of the disciples would have doubted, if they were the ones out for groceries when Jesus appears. Thomas, "the Twin," was not there, he did not see Jesus or hear him himself, and so he doesn't believe.

When I was in seminary, finishing out my final year, it was time to enter into the assignment process. Soon-to-be pastors fill out paperwork,

laying out where they hope to serve their first call. Many of you know that I am from the East Coast, growing up in Maryland and going to seminary at Philadelphia. So you probably wouldn't be surprised to find out we had planned to stay in that area. The Midwest was nowhere on my mind.

Before we filled out that paperwork, our student advisor, Pastor Heidi, gave us a presentation to help us dream how God might use us. It was called "Why not Minot?" and she pitched us on the idea of going to places like the Dakotas, where pastors were in short supply. I remember sitting there and thinking, "this is just goofy, why would I ever want to go out there, that's not something for me." I was doubtful, because I had not seen or heard what it is like out here. I did not know the people, I did not know the culture, and so I didn't believe. Thomas, I think, is just like that as well.

Let's also remember that the rest of the disciples didn't believe about the resurrection, either. That morning, they had heard Mary Magdalene come to them and say "I have found Jesus." And yet it was not until the first time that Jesus appears to them in person, when he breathes on them, and shows them his hands and his side, that they rejoice. They also heard, but did not believe. It took a powerful moment of Jesus breaking into their lives and being present, hearing the promise of peace, for them to believe.

I wonder how many of us have that same reaction as Thomas and the rest of the disciples. "You want me to believe that my teacher who died, who we all know is buried in that tomb, has shown up again? You want me to believe that things that are dead come back to life? No, that's not the way the world works. I need proof to believe something like that." It is a tough thing, being asked to believe in something without seeing it ourselves.

Before we go further, we need to acknowledge a messy bit of history with this story. John's Gospel often uses the phrase "the Jews" and we hear it today. Historically, this has been used for anti-semitic views and policies, and has been the grounds for violence based on religion and race. But we have to remember that Jesus and his disciples are also Jews. Perhaps a better phrase to use would be to say that the disciples were "afraid of -" the religious authorities, or the mob, or their neighbors. At any

rate, they were afraid of everyone around them, and that is why they have locked themselves away in this room.

God has this incredible habit of being faithful to people, even when they are unfaithful to God. Even when our own faith is shaken, God remains faithful to us. When Jesus shows up that second time, for Thomas, he berates him a little bit for doubting, but he still shows up. Jesus still brings the gift of faith, even though it wasn't deserved. Thomas, you may have needed something more to believe, but the blessing of peace is still yours. The disciples, even though they had heard Mary and didn't believe, are still included in God's grace.

Now you may not have seen Jesus in your living room this week, displaying his hands and side to you, but I am sure that God has been with you. I am confident that Jesus has shown up for you in different ways. I have no doubt that God is working resurrection and grace in your life. Jesus takes the things that are broken in this world, and breathes new life into them, often making something new and better than they were before.

I wonder how the Holy Spirit is working in your life?

I wonder how the promise of resurrection came alive for you?

I wonder how Jesus has brought peace into your fear?

The disciples were locked away out of fear of their neighbors, and I suspect many of us are feeling the same way right now. There's this virus, this THING out there that is out to get us. You may or may not be under stay-at-home orders, but I bet all of us have felt some level of stress or fear. Yet Jesus surely shows up for us to bring peace, the same way he did for the disciples.

As this virus continues to create chaos and wreak havoc in our lives, I have seen God's presence at work. Whether through government programs that legislators have passed or individuals looking out for their neighbors, people are trying to serve one another. People who are healthy and at relatively low risk have stepped up, bringing food to their elderly neighbors so that they won't be exposed. Sewing machines and hands have been hard at work, making masks for health care professionals and

many other people who might need them. Doctors and nurses and armies of support personnel have put their own lives at risk as they attempt to save others. I may not have seen the pierced body of Jesus but I have certainly seen the work of Christ being lived out

Although I had trouble believing that the Dakotas would be a place for me, I have certainly seen God at work in my life. I was surely a “doubting Thomas” about how God would use me in a place like this, and yet God does wonderful things with our doubts and fears. I have been blessed to live and work in South Dakota. I’ve been blessed with wonderful neighbors and colleagues, wonderful members of churches that I get to proclaim the Gospel with, wonderful people to be witnesses of God’s grace together.

God’s faithfulness is stronger than our doubt. God will work wonders with broken things. God has called me and YOU to be a witness to the world. Because you know about Jesus, because you know God’s love, you are called to bring that peace of Jesus to a world that is hungry for good news, hungry for love, and hungry for peace.

Even though we may not have been there two thousand years ago to see Jesus emerge from the tomb, we are undoubtedly still witnesses. We are people who have seen resurrection, who have known God’s love, who are empowered by the Holy Spirit to share God’s peace with others who live in fear, and then to change the world for the sake of our neighbor. As Christians, we are God’s chosen people – chosen not to save others, but to tell them that Jesus has already done that for them.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed, Alleluia! That is the story we share with the world.

¹⁶Now may our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and through grace gave us eternal comfort and good hope, ¹⁷comfort your hearts and strengthen them in every good work and word. [2 Thessalonians 16-17]

Go, be good witnesses, and peace be with you!

