

Second Sunday of Easter
Sermon Text: John 20:19-31
Related text: 1 John 1:1-2:2
Date Preached: April 19, 2009

Alleluia. Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed. Alleluia.

That is right. Christ is risen indeed. And since that very first Easter Day, the church has proclaimed Christ crucified and risen.

We phrase this truth as two sides of the same coin, meaning that we very seldom proclaim one without the other. Intellectually, it can seem simple to make this jump, especially for those of us nearly two thousand years removed from that first Easter morning.

Emotionally, it is a much harder jump to make. Consider the reaction of those first witnesses. Fear, confusion, sorrow, grief, and doubt are but some of the reaction to meeting the risen Christ. How incredibly hard it must have been to go from immense grief to instant joy? We can do that more easily because this is not the first time many of us in the Christian church have made this journey.

Without the gift of time we might be like Thomas. He is labeled as a doubter, though that isn't exactly

what he does. It is more appropriate to identify his reaction to that of a negotiator. You want me to believe he is raised, fine. Let me see the proof. Thomas wants the opportunity to place his hands in Jesus' wounds. He wants to see Jesus for himself. He wants the experience the other disciples have had that he missed out in sharing.

Thomas lays down conditions. Like the other disciples it is hard for him to make that emotional jump from the sorrow of Good Friday to the resurrection joy of Easter. It may be hard for us as well.

One of the gifts of the churches that celebrate the life of Christ in a liturgical calendar is that Easter goes beyond one day. We began last Sunday a fifty day season of joy and celebration. We began last Sunday the Easter season that piece by piece reveals the meaning of Christ's resurrection for us today.

In today's Gospel reading, one of the meanings that the resurrection has is forgiveness. Jesus comes and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any they are retained."

I suspect that when someone has sinned against us, done what we felt or said something that was hurtful and wrong our first reaction is not likely going to be our best. In being hurt by another's sin, we may react sinfully. Instead of turning the other cheek, we think of the Biblical phrase an eye for an eye.

Our culture is still one in which we operate on that very principle and in many ways we feel justified in so doing.

How do we feel about the man accused of killing three of Pittsburgh's police officers? Surely that is a sin that should be retained, right? Surely this man deserves the death penalty, right?

Before your mind answers, consider what we heard from our reading in First John. "If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sin, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins."

Jesus went to the cross to spare us from the just punishment for our sins. So yes, there is forgiveness for those on death row. Yes, there is forgiveness for those in corporate America who accept those big bonuses. Yes, there is forgiveness for the middle and upper class alike that have benefitted from the labors

of the poor or have neglected them with simple chiding of their perceived lack of work ethic.

Forgiveness does not come easy for us in our human nature. In many respects it is like going into the darkness of Good Friday and turning on the bright flood lights of Easter. It is a hard shift to make and one that would be downright impossible without one big piece.

Jesus gave his disciples a gift. “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The same Holy Spirit that helps us believe in the resurrection and the same Holy Spirit that helps us believe in Jesus Christ as our Lord is the same Holy Spirit that helps us forgive.

The Holy Spirit, the third person in the mystery of what we call the Holy Trinity, is present with us to help us do what Christ commands. The Holy Spirit, present and given in baptism, makes it possible for us to forgive not only each other, not only the stranger who has sinned against us, but also ourselves. There are times when the hardest person to forgive is our self.

As the new life of spring emerges around us, let the new life of Christ and the forgiveness we have through him also emerge in our lives. In this Easter

season of new life, embrace the new life of forgiveness that is given to us as a gift. Most importantly, with the help and in the presence of the Holy Spirit, let us grow, forgiving all who have sinned against us and move forward in this new life. AMEN.