

Easter.2.A.2023.04.16.Sermon (Jn. 20:29-31)

A. Cottrill

"Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written 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 our text. Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, Amen.

The story of how the first atomic bomb was assembled is fascinating. The American government basically created three small towns with factories and plants each building separate parts to the single complex device. The people working there were left completely in the dark. They just thought it was 'for the war effort'. With that vague goal, they had to make specific parts that when later assembled would create something that we now know as an atomic weapon. They didn't know what they were doing, they couldn't see what it was going to create, they just did their part and kept it a secret. Even today the world resounds with fears over nuclear war, and we might wish we could've undone that step in human engineering. But no one can deny the power of that effort, the impact it has had, and is still having in our world.

Jesus meets with his disciples and there is very little faith. In fact there is outright unbelief. Thomas vows "unless I see... I will never believe". If someone outside of those 500 witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus made a similar vow they would be locked out of the faith, out of Christ's kingdom. For we are called by scripture to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

Jesus had constantly called out his disciples for their little faith. When he stilled the storm he rebuked them "Have you still no faith?" (Mk. 4:40), when the centurion believed in him, Jesus declared "not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Lk. 7:9), and when the disciples were not able to cast out a demon, Jesus cried in condemnation: "O faithless generation" (Mk. 9:19). We think of skepticism and atheism as modern day problems but they have been with

humanity all throughout its history. Where God calls us to trust and believe, the devil tempts us to deny and doubt.

And in our sermon text today we find Jesus speaking not to Thomas but actually to us, to those Christians who come after. We are given a special blessing which the disciples were denied. And let me remind everyone - the disciples were heroic saints. Tradition and history record that Thomas went as a missionary to India and spread the Gospel to a church that continued to exist through over a thousand years. The other disciples became martyrs, died for the cause of Christ and the gospel. The book of revelation even says their names will be written on the foundations of the walls of heaven. Believe me friends, my name is not gonna be there.

But how remarkable that Jesus extends a promise and a blessing to you and me today if we unlike Thomas respond in faith and trust, rather than denial. Jesus rebukes his disciples saying "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." You and I have not looked on the wounds of the risen Jesus. We have not put our hands into the side of Christ in the way which Thomas was allowed, but ultimately seems to have forgoed. And you and me here today are given a blessing which none of the disciples could've been granted for we have not seen Jesus and yet we believe.

Blessings are a remarkable thing in the history of the Bible. We don't tend to think about it as Lutherans enough. I mean, I remember an older Missouri-Synod pastor say that after communion, the men would not return to their pews but go outside to smoke, and this happened so often that once when he gave the final benediction - which is just the Latin word for blessing - the pastor walked outside the church and spoke it to them there, before returning inside the church. I think the best picture of our wrong-notion of blessing comes from the tradition of saying 'God bless you' when someone sneezes. Although in pandemic days we sooner run than

stay to give a blessing. God bless you - at sneezes is a trite, empty set of words we parrot as a reflex. But what is a blessing?

Jesus here uses the word Makarioi - proclaimed to be blessed by God, to be in a happy state that others envy. One scholarly note says " μακάριος refers to the believer in Christ who is satisfied and secure in the midst of life's hardships because of the indwelling fullness of the Spirit." For we are given faith by the power of the Holy Spirit. For each of us who has not seen Jesus and yet believes, we have been filled by God the Holy Spirit himself, who was poured out upon us in baptism, and who sustains us in our faith. To know that God speaks well about us is an incredible gift, to receive a blessing the disciples may envy. And that matters to us, we are social creatures who want the praise of our peers.

My friend told me the story of moving to California and meeting Kiefer Sutherland the famous actor. And he said that he didn't want to just spout out 'hey you're famous!' and he knew that Kiefer Sutherland was the grandson of Tommy Douglas, who was voted the greatest Canadian for his work in healthcare and politics. So he said to Kiefer in that elevator: 'Sir, as a Canadian it's an honour to meet the grandson of Tommy Douglas, the greatest Canadian' and apparently the actor broke out into a smile and said 'then I consider you a brother' and gave my friend Sam a hug. We all envied Sam because of the blessed word which had been spoken over him by someone famous, and do we realize the blessed word which we has been spoken upon us by the God of the Universe this morning?

The other reason I told that story is because the grandson is honoured not because of anything he achieved. I don't have to thank Kiefer Sutherland when I go to the Emergency Room and don't get a bill for it. And yet the honor continues to the children and grandchildren. And you and I have been blessed by God because we are the spiritual grandchildren of those

disciples and Christians who also went before us, not seeing, but believing. The point is, that we have been blessed by God. He has spoken his fatherly approval over us, because Christ has planted faith in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. We Christians of 2023 have a blessing the disciples didn't, for we have not seen and yet believed.

Believing in the risen Christ is not about going with your gut, or doing a math equation. It is about receiving the means of grace, the word and sacrament, and relying on their strength and their testimony. I have the worst sense of direction of anyone I know. The stories are true that when I travelled Europe my friends would use me as a reverse compass. 'Andrew where do you think we should go?' and then we'd head in the opposite direction. Likewise the scariest words to hear if you're in the car with me are, hang on I **think** I know where it is.

When we give into doubt and denial, when we lose faith, we are trusting that faulty instrument which Thomas trusted. That word of the devil which calls us to deny and doubt our Lord. But when we rely on the word of God in the Bible, we don't have to worry, we have a safe guide. It's like having the GPS or a map to guide you.

For our sermon text closes with these words from John which I love: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written 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."

John's point is that he was there, he and Thomas and the others watched with a critical eye to see if Jesus was who he said he was, and our Lord Jesus passed the test. John wrote it all down so that we can know too, and the Holy Spirit who worked in Christ, works in our hearts as well when we trust in this gospel. The disciples saw yes, but they also staked their lives upon what they saw, they died for their commitment to the truth. And we are given a special blessing

today, because we have not seen, yet believe. May God's gracious Spirit guard and keep us in this faith, and in his grace, all of our days.

In the name of Jesus: Amen.