

Easter Mission in 2017 (A Homily by Martin Lohrmann)

Colleagues,

This Sunday, the Second of Easter, we hear the first conclusion of St. John's Gospel in the unabashed confession of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!" This strikes as an excellent time to pass along a contribution I got in late January from Martin Lohrmann, who teaches Reformation history and theology at Wartburg Seminary. Martin recently served a term on the Crossing Board of Directors. He sent the homily he delivered on January 18 at the seminary's Wednesday Eucharist. The church's calendar sets that day aside to remember the Confession of St. Peter. One of the texts appointed for the day, Acts 4:8-13, is also a classic Easter season text, reverberating with the joy and grit that Thomas erupts with. Here's how Martin underscored that for his students and colleagues, and now for you.

Peace and Joy,

Jerry Burce

A Homily on the Confession of Peter

Texts: Acts 4:8-13 & Matthew 16:13-19

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In the name of Christ our Lord. Amen

In the first chapter of Acts, the crucified and risen Christ spent forty days with the disciples before ascending into heaven and vanishing from their sight. Death could not hold him, but apparently heaven would. In that way, Jesus' ascension might have seemed like a mixed blessing: he was victorious over death, but it doesn't seem like he's here among us any longer, either.

Both the crucifixion and ascension can seem to have left abiding absences. But Jesus was not remotely finished with his followers or with the world. Through the Holy Spirit, the disciples themselves brought Jesus' holy grace, truth, healing and resurrection to this broken creation. They started in Jerusalem, a capital city well acquainted with mock justice, mob violence and cynical power plays. The disciples then went to Samaria, heartland of the culturally and spiritually impure. Then they went out to all the lost, forgotten, conquered and conquering peoples of this earth to share Christ's truth and life. Jesus was not remotely absent. Death could not hold him. Heaven does not hide him away from us, either. Crucified, risen, ascended: he is God with us still.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, Peter and John kept on doing what Jesus taught them to do. They kept being the people Jesus freed them to be. They taught spiritually hungry crowds, they gave the good news of resurrection in Christ to jaded souls, and they cared for sick and forgotten people. And they had a great time doing it: the gospel really is good news! By Acts chapter 4, these kind deeds and good tidings of great joy got them arrested for the first time.

In their trial, Peter and John talked with confidence about this good news for all people: Jesus Christ changes lives. When the ruler and elders heard this, what really astounded them was not the miraculous healing or heavenly message. It was the fact that ordinary people were doing the things of God. If ordinary people

are doing holy things, then there's no stopping it. As the text says, "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (Acts 4:13). That's what Jesus did then and what he does now: he brings the great things of God to ordinary lives. And this is unstoppable.

In the power of the Holy Spirit, we get to be part of this gospel. We receive this new life of grace and truth and apply it to ourselves. We share the power of Christ when we care for sick and forgotten people, because Jesus came not for those who are well (or who think they are well) but for those who need help. We share this good news when we teach that God desires mercy, not sacrifice. These days—with Christ—we get to be people of truth and love in an openly post-truth culture where love mostly means self-satisfaction. In such a world, Jesus frees us to care, serve, listen, share, receive and enjoy life as ordinary broken people blessed to see and experience holiness everywhere. This is gospel truth; it is a Way of Life with a capital W and capital L. It is the wonderful Way of Jesus Christ.

Christ's power and goodness are ours simply by trusting him, by receiving him through faith alone. Faith means knowing in our hearts, bearing in our bodies, breathing with our breath that Jesus Christ is Lord. With Peter we confess: "You are the messiah, the Son of the living God." We reclaim this confession ourselves today and every day as the foundation for life that neither death, nor the gates of hell, nor even our own cynicism can shake.

What does this confession of faith look like in practice? I ask this because anyone can say that they are taking a stand for faith or truth. It's an easy thing to say and believe about one's own perspective. And then there's the question of whether we can even know what is true and good. "What is truth, anyways?" asked

Pontius Pilate as he sanctioned the execution of the holy one of God. How do we know which confessional stands or prophetic stances are gospel truth?

Faced with such real questions, the Spirit has not left us empty. First, we notice that in Acts 4 Peter and John weren't speaking abstractly about God, truth or goodness when they got arrested. They were simply doing what Jesus' people always do: worshiping God, talking with people about God's grace in Christ, and caring for the sick. These holy things don't change. The gospel isn't abstract. It's something to be experienced, lived and shared. So that's one way we know gospel truth is we ourselves have received this good news and can talk about the difference it makes.

Second, when it comes to faithful stands and prophetic speech, the cross remains our guide. We can ask: do our words point people to a self-emptying Lord, who desires mercy not sacrifice for this broken world, who came to find the lost, save sinners, and give godliness to the ungodly? If so, then we're on the right road. And we can ask: do our lives have their starting point in the foundational trust that God is at work to save, heal and redeem, even when such healing and salvation seems impossibly far away? We know our Lord through the cross. To this end, we pray for the Holy Spirit to guide us in the life-giving way of the cross one day at a time.

Jesus Christ is life and truth. Death could not hold him and heaven does not hide him away from us. Crucified, risen, and ascended: Jesus Christ is God with us still, bringing the great things of God to ordinary people. Amen