

Second Sunday of Easter

EASTER'S SPIRIT-FILLED LIFE

John 20:19-31

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Analysis by Norb E. Kabelitz

19When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors 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 among 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.

Note: We as Lutherans are eloquent when talking about justification by faith. But how articulate are we when we preach about the connection between the forgiveness of sins and Easter? Helpful resources include Robert H. Smith's book, Easter Gospels, Augsburg 1983, and the article "Living Forgiveness," in Word and World, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, Winter 2007.

DIAGNOSIS: If Jesus Is Not Raised—We Are Condemned Fugitives

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Nowhere to Go!

The disciples had been warned by Jesus, "The hour is coming, indeed has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, leaving me alone" (John 16:32). Now they are closeted behind locked doors, paranoid. They had nowhere else to go. At one point they had left everything to follow Jesus; now there was no Jesus to follow. He had been crucified, died, and was buried. They were orphaned "like sheep without a shepherd." Where do you go when a storm of aggressive hostility or controversy threatens you because you are identified with Jesus? Do you have a safe place? What do you do when you feel defeated?

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Nothing Is Worth Believing!

If Jesus is not raised, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain: empty, futile, worthless, useless, foolish, having no value, ineffectual, foolish, "a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Thoughts of having been misled by a false

messiah, a pretender, must have cultivated disappointment and doubt, as it does in us when we falter in our faith. "Jesus had struggled with enemies both seen and unseen and had ended up on a cross constructed by them. What other name but defeat can be attached to such an end?" (Smith). The consequence for the disciples is that without faith they are fearful; John repeats the phrase three times, "for fear of the Jews" (7:13; 9:22; 19:38). Would they be hunted down as fugitives of a discredited messiah and arrested by the religious police? But the adversity seems to be much bigger than that, since Jesus talks about "the ruler of this world" (16:11). Why will they "weep and lament, but the world will rejoice" (16:20)? Does he mean, perhaps, "that the world is organized in powerful contradiction of God" (Smith) and must be overcome?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *No Forgiveness*

If Jesus is not raised then there is no forgiveness of sins. We are in big trouble, for "the wages of sin is death!" If death has not been conquered then we are still in our sins. The Scriptures affirm that under the law, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). For sure, we have the shed blood of Jesus, but without his resurrection only a cult of the Holy Sepulcher remains. Archaeologists may then rightly insist that Jesus' remains might be found in Jerusalem's ancient bone yards! And, if that's the case, isn't it also true that without the Resurrection there is no forgiveness of sins? John begins his Gospel with the claim that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He affirms this with Jesus' book-end commission to forgive sins. But without Jesus' resurrection we are fugitives from the law, locked behind closed doors, and in "lifelong bondage through the fear of death" (Heb. 2:15). "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law!" (1 Cor. 15:56). John Patton's book raised the question, "Is Human Forgiveness Possible?" The answer: Not

without divine forgiveness!

PROGNOSIS: Since Jesus is Risen—He Makes Us Missionaries of Forgiveness!

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *From His Death Comes Our Life*

But now is Christ Risen! He made for us an Easter world where forgiveness and love overcomes our failures and separations! Death has been defeated and the forgiveness of sins is a divine promise to be trusted as a reality. Jesus displays the wounds to say the Crucified has been raised. His wounds are badges that death has been defeated. “We see Jesus, made lower than the angels crowned with glory and honor because of suffering and death. By the grace of God he tasted death for everyone” (Heb. 2:10). The wounds are a sign of authenticity. Even after his resurrection he did not flee to the Father through heaven’s gate, but returned to his followers to make the Good Friday-Easter connection. No wonder deaf people make the sign for Jesus by placing the middle finger of each hand into the palm of the other; the name of Jesus is etched in their hands.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *From His Life Comes our Faith*

I am grateful for John’s treatment of Thomas! Jesus’ return a week later initiates the disciples’ witness, “We have seen the Lord!” Ironically, that was Mary Magdalene’s original witness, disregarded by the disciples. But by highlighting Thomas’s response, John “is able to put Thomas into the shoes of all later generations, all people who do not see or touch Jesus but are called by faith in him by means of verbal testimony” (Smith; see also Romans 10:17). Thomas wants to see the wounds; he wants proof that Good Friday and Easter are connected! Thomas sees (perhaps touches) and is overwhelmed: “My Lord and My God!” he exclaims. This confession is not unlike the soldier’s cry in

Mark, "Truly this man was the Son of God!" (Mk. 15:39). It is the confession of every questioner who finds divine forgiveness confirmed in the wounded but raised Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *From Life and Faith Comes Mission!*

"Peace be with you," Jesus declares to his followers. (See the hymn, "Look, Now He Stands," Lutheran Book of Worship, #152). And, if death has been overcome by his resurrection, then so has the judgment on sin: therefore they have "shalom" (wholeness, healing, non-recrimination)! Since unbelief is at the heart of sin for John (8:24), coming to faith means nothing less than the destruction of sin! The believer's vocation and mission is sharing the life-creating word (17:20), the forgiveness of sins! The disciples on Easter night receive the Holy Spirit, "the Lord and giver of life" (as we say in the Nicene Creed), and are sent with authority to forgive or retain sins, to call people to faith by the Gospel, and open their eyes (see John 12:36-50; Isa. 6:9-10). If we do not announce it to them then it will not happen for them! Through this commission the Holy Spirit (the Advocate) will convict the world of sin, which is unbelief (16:8-11) and testify to Jesus as the forgiver of sins. Living in Christ's forgiveness, the disciple is called to "forgive as you have been forgiven!" And if divine forgiveness is possible, so is human forgiveness! We begin to live it in this Easter world!