

John 20:19-31
Second Sunday of Easter
April 7, 2024

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, the gospel reading which concludes, “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.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Our typical use (or “misuse”) of this Sunday’s text is much like our typical (mis)use of last Sunday’s text. Last Sunday, we spoke of fear instead of faith... but we considered the common misapplication that ‘we shouldn’t be afraid to *die*,’ when the women weren’t afraid of death at all (they were going to the tomb to dress the dead with spices!), they were afraid to *live* in the certainty of God’s promises. Today, we easily come with a similar misapplication of this morning’s text, assuming that Thomas’s doubts are equal to our own... and then we go off on a tangent about belief in the empty tomb, belief that Jesus rose again, and maybe even belief in the historicity of Jesus at all! (Isn’t that where the 20th century took western religion, as study of history adopted what is called a ‘higher-critical method’ of interpreting *all* of history (so that some think we can redefine the beginning of America as 1619 instead of 1492 or 1607)... but especially a higher-critical method of interpreting Biblical history,

so that now we are forced to use a text like doubting Thomas to address doubts of whether any of this (the news of the resurrection, the very mission and life of Jesus!) even happened!

Don't be drawn down that rabbit hole of ignorant hubris! All of history until the late 19th century admitted the historicity of Jesus, including his death and resurrection. Even heretical religions like Islam and Mormonism speak of it. For 1900 years there's simply no *doubt* of its truth. In fact, just last week a Rasmussen National Survey was published reporting that – though only 10% of Americans go to church every week – over 70% of Americans believe that Jesus physically rose from the grave once in history. Indeed, CS Lewis, the great 20th century Christian apologist, points out that St Paul never once spoke of the empty tomb, but always – to all his gentile hearers – spoke of the Resurrection. As Lewis concludes, such can only be because Paul knew all of his hearers acknowledged the empty tomb as fact, and the only question is what the Resurrection theologically meant *for them!*

That fits right in line with us 2000 years later... with the 70% of Americans who believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus, and yet only 10% go to church regularly: no matter how hard the higher-critics have tried to sow distrust of history, the fact of the empty tomb is largely not in doubt (somewhat

amazing, because all we hear from media and Hollywood is the “popular/common” view that Jesus is a myth“!). It’s not the fact of the empty tomb that is in doubt; the *for-me benefit* is what people don’t understand or appreciate.

You might struggle with the same thing: “The fact of Jesus walking the earth, dying, and rising again? Yep, I believe that! But, what its relevance is for anything outside of its own event? Yeah, of that I’m not so sure.”

Go back to doubting Thomas. To be sure, Thomas’ immediate doubt was whether Jesus was in fact risen – “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.” But, *seeing* for himself the risen Jesus, what did Thomas cry? He did *not* cry, “The tomb is empty!” Or “Jesus lives!” Or, “No one in future generations can ever doubt the history of it!” No, Thomas cried, “My Lord and my God.” It wasn’t just about believing whether Jesus was historically risen. It was about what that resurrection meant regarding the person of Jesus, and therefore regarding the benefit for all those whose hope is the risen Jesus.

In fact, it’s not coincidental, nor is it merely a matter of history, that the record of Jesus appearing to the doubting Thomas comes right on the heels of Jesus saying to the Eleven,

“Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

That’s not coincidental, because the risen Jesus is not content to simply say, “Ta da! Look what I did! I’m risen!” Rather, the risen Jesus says, “Now, how are the nations going to benefit from my conquering of sin and death?” *That’s* what you are confessing when you confess the resurrection of Christ once in history. He died and rose not just to show that He *could*, but to benefit *you* with the forgiveness of sins and the life that – by that forgiveness – flows from Him to you sacramentally. Yes, always keep those synonyms in mind: forgiveness of sins means *life*. Your life is not defined by materials, daily bread, possessions, reputation, even happiness or health; it’s defined by oneness with God... oneness with God (a clear conscience before God) that allows you to recognize His good will toward you in all other areas of temporal and eternal life. The forgiveness of sins gives you life: “I came” Jesus says, “that they may have life and have it abundantly.” – What do you receive in the Body and Blood of Jesus, but his very life!

Notice how much of the confession of the resurrected Jesus is about the *life* that is your benefit because of the resurrection. It’s not about His empty tomb – that’s a historical

given! It's about the *life* that Christ shares with you (yes, be not afraid to *live*, we said last week).

Notice, for example, how St John speaks of it in his first epistle:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of *life* – the *life* was made manifest, and we have seen *it*.”

Notice that: of what is John talking, but the flesh-and-blood person of Jesus Christ. Yet, what is John's *focus*? – the benefit to you from Jesus Christ... as if John says, “We have seen him with our eyes, looked upon and touched him with our hands. He's the word of *life* – in Him, true life was made manifest, and (to *quote* John), “we have seen **it**” – the life that is yours because of Christ crucified and resurrected.

“We have seen *it*, and testify to *it* and proclaim to you *the eternal life*,” and yet, John never disconnects the benefit from the Christ who secured the benefit, so that he says, “[we] proclaim to you *the eternal life*, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us” (there's the person of Jesus Christ). Notice how the person and the benefit He won for us are, in a sense, one and the same. I cannot say, “I have no need of Jesus, for I now have life.” But, nor can I say, “I believe in Jesus,” and have that word

only be about his historic existence or the empty tomb and not also about all the benefit *for me* through Jesus unto eternal life.

It's the same thing we hear at the end of our gospel reading, isn't it? At the end of John 20, the same John (writer of epistle and gospel alike) says, "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." Notice what John doesn't say; he doesn't say, "These things are written that you may believe Jesus existed" or "that you may believe that Jesus rose again." No, "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ." The title means *nothing* for His sake, but means everything for your sake. If Jesus is the Christ that God promised, that Christ that was going to die and rise again, then I may believe that Jesus is the fulfillment of all God's promises and therein, Jesus has secured for me *life* – everlasting *life*...from baptism onward, my inheritance.

Now, we've been focusing on the one extreme that says, "I believe that Jesus existed in history" or "I believe he physically rose again in history" without also saying, "It's all for my benefit and life." However, we must also be careful of the other extreme in hearing this, the extreme that says, "Whether or not Jesus' rose again in history and his tomb truly stands empty in history is of no matter; what really matters is 'spiritual life.'" Such a-historical

mysticism you must immediately spit out whenever it enters your ears, heart, or mind. The reason we don't dwell on the empty tomb isn't because it doesn't matter or didn't happen... the reason we don't dwell on it is because it was never seriously doubted by human history until the hubris of higher-critical methodology. Don't waste your breath with those who think they in the 21st century can more accurately relay the history of the 1st century than its own residents and historians! – what egotistical buffoonery.

Instead, because the grave is empty, because Jesus rose again in history, the Scriptures declare to us the true and eternal life that is ours in Him, delivered from *the* altar of Calvary to *this* altar of Calvary. And that true and eternal life is ours then to share with one another. The picture in the first reading – of the early Church sharing all things together – that often is misused to say that God's politics of choice is communism. What nonsense! In the freedom of the gospel, the early church cared for each other precisely because they knew they shared eternal life in Christ with each other. And, if they were fellow heirs in such everlasting life via the divine sacraments, then how does that reinterpret our share together in lesser matters of earthly, temporal life?

Such does not mean that your property and possessions are not civilly your own! If such were the case, there'd be no need

for commandments five through ten! Instead commandments five through ten constantly remind us our neighbor has his own life, wife, things, reputation, and rights. But, we are to see in our neighbor one whose life has eternally been defined by Christ Jesus – unless that neighbor has received the gospel in vain. But, where they have received the gospel believing the good news of Christ, then the Scriptures declare to us, define for us, our daily life just as they do our eternal life. Indeed, our whole daily life with and among one another is interpreted by the fact that the Scriptures declare to us the eternal life that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Yes, it's not just that the Scriptures *declare* the true and eternal life that is in Christ Jesus. Rather, notice: the Scriptures declare it right to you. John even includes you *in* the pages of Holy Scripture when he says, “These [things] are written so that YOU may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, (again, not “that you may believe Jesus existed!”... but that “you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, accomplished and secured all of God’s promises for you”)... and that by believing [that good news] YOU (there’s *you* again... you are right in the Scriptures)... YOU may have life in Jesus’ name.”

What more is there to say? What better words can be declared than what Scripture says?, so that we are left near

speechless that such life and benefit is yours... near speechless,
but to confess, "My Lord and my God."

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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