

“God Even Makes Doubters to be Useful”

John 20:19-31

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

Last week, as we celebrated Easter Sunday, we heard of how Mary Magdalene and the other women went to the empty tomb and they saw and believed. They were witnesses with their own eyes that the grave had no hold over Christ our Lord. They went and told the disciples of this most wonderful event. But, as we saw, among all the disciples, there was a reluctance to believe. It took a little time.

That eyewitness account has been heard by millions, even billions, of people. It is an event that has been told and retold throughout the ages. Since that first Easter Sunday, Christ’s followers have gathered together each Sunday since to celebrate, remember, and tell the next generation about the empty grave. No matter what season it is; no matter what time of the church year, we are gathering here; we come together in the Lord’s House because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Each week, this is what we do. That is why we come. However, since the days of the apostles, this most wonderful good news that Christ is risen has been met with skepticism by a great number of people. Just as we heard last week, the words of the eyewitnesses seemed like nonsense – “an idle tale”

This week after Easter is when our lesson series brings our attention to

the happenings of Jesus and the disciples in the hours and days following the resurrection. In the evening of that first Easter Sunday, each year we are reminded of poor old doubting Thomas. Unfortunately for Thomas, his skepticism concerning Christ's resurrection is about all that most people remember of him.

He did go on to be a great proclaimer of the Gospel. The early church historians record that he carried the Good News of Christ's death and resurrection to India – where he stood up as the lone voice preaching the truth to the Hindu worshipers. He established churches and was eventually killed by Hindu priests because he would not stop proclaiming the Word of God and the message of Easter – the resurrection. But what we remember about him is his failure on Easter evening.

We need to remember this is how the world is. Some people, like the 3000 we will read about in a few weeks on Pentecost who heard Peter's sermon, came to faith, and were baptized – they did not approach the Good News of Christ's resurrection with any doubt or questioning. They heard God's Word and the Holy Spirit opened their hearts and created faith in them immediately.

Many more people are like Thomas – upon hearing this most fantastic news of forgiveness, life, and salvation, they are hesitant to whole-heartedly embrace that which they have not seen. After all, from little on, we are taught that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is too good to be true.

St. Augustine, one of the great champions of the Early Church was the same way – he was openly a heretic for about nine years. He was a part of the Manichaeian cult. Even Martin Luther, in his early years as a monk was

angry with God and even went so far as to say that during that time he hated God (because young Martin Luther did not understand how good the news was that Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!).

After the Saturday service Palm Sunday weekend, that time in Luther's life was a topic of conversation with Dr. Martin Dicke (the missionary from Papua New Guinea who was visiting us). His uncle was one of the first American missionaries there and it took several years before the Good News was received in faith by anyone. But now there are numerous churches and numerous Christians filled with the joy and light of the Gospel and hope of the resurrection – where there was once only darkness.

But then there are also those like the chief priests in Jerusalem who refused to believe Christ was risen even though the evidence was before them, and the Hindu priests in India who also refused to listen to the Word of God and killed Thomas for his preaching.

There are those who are openly critical of God's message of salvation, who will never heed God's Word or allow the Holy Spirit to penetrate the hardness and darkness of their hearts. But that is not the kind of doubting for which Thomas gets criticized each year as his story is retold. Thomas was a faithful child of God who suffered from the same failings as many of God's children.

There are very few in this world who are born into a faithful family, raised with the Word of God, and remain devoted to their Lord during the entirety of their life. Those who have been blessed in that way should give thanks daily for the Lord preserving them and not allowing them to wander too far away from the Good Shepherd.

But for most of God's children, there are stumblings and struggles like

Thomas or Augustine or Luther. It is only by the grace of God that our lives are not demanded of us during our time of doubt and failure. But instead of condemning all of us as we deserve, our Father in heaven remembers that the price for our sins has been paid in full. And He has set each of us apart to be useful in His kingdom – just like Thomas was useful.

Sure, he messed up; he messed up bad. I can only imagine how low he felt after Jesus chastised him the way He did. But when you read the text, it was not self-pity and self-doubt that Thomas expressed; it was faith and joy – “My Lord and my God!”

There are a lot of Thomas’s in the world. There are a lot of people who do not believe the Word the first time it is heard, but need to see Christ in action. This is where we become useful. This is where parents and godparents become especially useful. Jesus no longer walks and talks and eats among us according to His physical, bodily nature. Christ is now seen and heard in His Word, at His Table, and in you.

Through your baptismal faith, you carry Christ with you, and He is seen by others through what you say and do. It is not just here on Saturday nights or Sunday mornings that we are witnesses that Christ is risen. Our Lord is present in every conversation that we have.

Both here and out there, we are witnesses of the wonderful Easter event that we have not seen – so that Christ’s words are fulfilled in us: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Amen.
Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!