

WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

CALL TO WORSHIP:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ!
In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade.*
Let us worship God.

(1 Peter 1.3-4a)

PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

We gather once again to worship you in this unconventional way, separated physically, but joined in spirit; and we continue our celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. We continue to praise you for your demonstration of your great power, and for the way you turned an apparent defeat into a decisive victory. We thank you too that this victory points forward to a much greater victory over the powers of evil and death still to come.

We confess, however, that we continue to be subject to the power of sin. In spite of our efforts to live in your ways, we fall short of your expectations and standards. We hurt people around us through thoughtless words and inconsiderate actions, as well as through things we say and do quite deliberately. Because of our self-centeredness, we find it difficult to acknowledge our sin — or even to be aware of it.

As we begin our time of worship, then, we do acknowledge our sin — and we ask for your forgiveness, made possible by Jesus' death on the cross.

We ask also that we may open ourselves anew to the guidance and power of the Holy Spirit, so that we may live more faithfully in your ways, and may serve you more diligently.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our crucified Savior and risen Lord; and we pray *together*, now, as he taught us:

THE LORD'S PRAYER *(KJV - "debts" and "debtors")*

Our Father, which art in heaven:

Hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come.

Thy will be done in earth,

as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil;

for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory,

for ever. Amen.

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Jesus,
and through him to reconcile all people to himself
by making peace through his blood,
shed on the cross.*

(Colossians 1.19-20, ad.)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God *sincerely*,
let us be *assured* that God will *forgive* us.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

- First Reading: Acts 2.22-33 - Peter's sermon on Pentecost (excerpt)

This reading is a sample of early Christian preaching. It's a portion of Peter's sermon on Pentecost, in which Peter focuses on the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the *second* part of his sermon. We normally read the *first* part on Pentecost itself.

As you will see, Peter quotes a few verses from Psalm 16, and interprets them as a prediction of Jesus' resurrection.

Listen for God's word.

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#### **- Psalm: Psalm 16** - "Keep me safe, God"

Psalm 16 is a psalm of *trust*.

In it, the writer expresses his faith and trust that God will keep him from dying, in a certain unspecified situation, perhaps a serious illness.

As we just saw in today's reading from the Book of Acts, early Christians interpreted the second-last *verse* of this psalm as a foretelling of Jesus' resurrection.

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Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit;
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever! Amen.

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#### **- Letter Reading:** 1 Peter 1.1-9 - "New birth into a living hope"

In this reading, Peter speaks about the positive consequences of Jesus' resurrection for those who believe in him.

The geographical names that are mentioned in the first verse are all in what is today Turkey.  
Listen for God's word.

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- Gospel Reading: John 20.19-31 - The risen Jesus appears to his disciples

In this reading, Jesus appears to his disciples *twice* after his resurrection — first, on the evening of the day he was raised; and then again, a week later.

Listen for God's word.

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Thanks be to God for the scriptures,  
and for his word, which he speaks to us through them.

**SERMON:** “Belief: A Matter of Choice”

On this second Sunday of the Easter season, we continue looking at scripture passages that speak of the resurrection of Jesus. In the Gospel reading for today, the eleven disciples see the risen Jesus for the first time — and then see him again, a week later. In the reading from the Book of Acts, the apostle Peter announces the resurrection of Jesus to a large crowd on the day of Pentecost. And in the reading from the Letters, Peter celebrates the fact that, through Jesus' resurrection, God gives those who believe in him *new birth into a living hope ... and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade* (1 Peter 1.3-4).

Last Sunday, we read Matthew's account of the Easter event — how two of Jesus' female disciples were told of Jesus' resurrection on that first Easter morning, how they then ran into the risen Jesus on their way back into the city to share the news with the other disciples, and then how the eleven disciples finally saw Jesus for themselves when they met with him on a mountain in Galilee.

Today's Gospel reading from the Gospel of John is quite different, though. It speaks of not just *one*, but *two* appearances of the risen Jesus to his disciples; and not in Galilee, either, but rather in the city of Jerusalem — perhaps even in the same upper room where they had shared a special meal the Thursday before; that is, the evening on which Jesus was arrested. As I said last Sunday, each Gospel writer has told the story in his own way, reflecting his own understanding and interpretation of the events, so there's not much point in trying to harmonize the various accounts into one composite account.

Today's story takes up roughly the second half of Chapter 20 of John's Gospel. It begins on the evening of the day on which Jesus was raised — that is, the evening of that first Easter Sunday. The disciples have already *heard* about Jesus' resurrection by this time. They heard about it from Mary Magdalene, who had gone to the tomb by herself that morning, only to find it open, and Jesus' body missing. In John's account, there are no Roman soldiers guarding the

tomb, no earthquake, and no angel descending from heaven and rolling the stone away from the entrance to the tomb; just an open, empty tomb, with no clue as to what had happened to Jesus' body. Later that morning, the risen Jesus actually appeared to Mary, and spoke with her briefly; so she *knew* that he was alive again, and she went back into the city to share that news with the rest of the disciples.

That's where things are at when today's story begins. In spite of the news of Jesus' resurrection, the disciples are still afraid that they may be persecuted by the Jewish authorities, and so they stay together behind locked doors. Do they *believe* what Mary Magdalene has told them about having seen Jesus alive again? John doesn't say. However, the fact that they're pretty much in hiding shows that they're more fearful than joyful.

They must have been surprised, then, even shocked, at Jesus' sudden appearance in their midst that evening; but the only emotion that John mentions is their joy at seeing him again: *The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord, he says* (John 20.20b).

Showing the disciples the wounds from his crucifixion enables Jesus to convince them that it's really *him* they're seeing. The man who mysteriously appears in the room not only *looks* like Jesus and *sounds* like Jesus, but also has the *wounds* that Jesus would have had — so it really must *be* Jesus. John mentions Jesus' *side*, referring to the incident in the Good Friday story in which one of the Roman soldiers stabbed Jesus in the side with a spear, to make sure that he was really dead — a detail that's found only in John's account.

Like last week's story in which Jesus meets with the disciples on a mountain in Galilee, this meeting quickly moves from being a simple *reunion* to being a *commissioning*. Jesus says to the disciples, *As the Father has sent me, I am sending you* (John 20.21). He then breathes on them, and says, *Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven* (John 20.23).

Of course, this account of the giving of the Holy Spirit is at odds with the one in the Book of Acts, in which Jesus instructs the disciples to *wait* for the giving of the Holy Spirit, and in which the Spirit is given at Pentecost, fifty days after the Passover, and *ten* days after Jesus has returned to heaven. Again, these are differences that can't be harmonized; and we just have to *live* with the tension between two accounts that say two quite different things.

A few chapters earlier in John, at the Supper on the Thursday evening, Jesus had *spoken* to the disciples about the giving of the Holy Spirit, and told them that the Spirit would essentially take his place as their teacher and leader after he had left them to return to the Father; so it's clear that the Spirit's role will be to guide and empower them in doing whatever Jesus is "sending" them to do.

Unlike last week's story in Matthew, in which Jesus sends the disciples out to *make disciples*

*of all nations* (Matthew 28.19), the task Jesus gives them in *today's* story has to do with the forgiveness of sin. It's hard to imagine that Jesus would give them authority actually to *forgive* sin, though, since that authority belongs only to Jesus himself and the Father; what he probably means is the authority to *declare* God's forgiveness — or not to declare it, as the case may be.

The story of Jesus' appearance to the disciples ends abruptly at that point; and it's only then that we learn that one of the disciples missed it — Thomas, of course. The fact that Thomas didn't want to *believe* that Jesus had been raised, without proof, is well known. He's often criticized for that, but, really, he wasn't asking for much more than what the other ten disciples had received in the way of proof. And I think we can certainly sympathize with him. The suggestion that someone who had suffered a horrible death had been raised to life two days later *is* pretty incredible. It's not part of everyday experience, either then or today.

When Jesus appears to the disciples a second time, a week later, then, he offers Thomas the proof that he had asked for — to see and touch the wounds from his crucifixion. But notice that he doesn't chide Thomas for his unwillingness to believe, or put him down. Inviting Thomas to touch his wounds, he then says simply — and, I believe, gently — *Stop doubting, and believe* (John 20.27). Perhaps he even said it with a smile.

Well, as it turns out, Thomas doesn't *need* to touch Jesus' wounds, after all. Just seeing the wounds, seeing Jesus alive again, and hearing his voice, seems to be enough to convince him that Jesus *has* been raised from the dead, just as it was for the other ten disciples the week before.

So, what does Thomas say? He doesn't say what we might expect. He doesn't say something like "You really *are* alive again!", or "It really *is* you!". Rather, what he says is, *My Lord and my God!* (John 20.28). This is what we call a "statement of faith". But it's not just faith in Jesus' *resurrection* that Thomas is expressing, he's also expressing his faith in Jesus' *identity* — which has been a recurring theme throughout John's Gospel. As early as Chapter 1, disciples of Jesus have been recognizing Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, and have sometimes referred to him as "Lord". But here Thomas makes the strongest statement of faith that we find anywhere in John's Gospel: that Jesus is "Lord and God".

Jesus commends Thomas for believing, saying, *Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* (John 20.29). In saying this, Jesus was no doubt thinking of all those who would come to faith in him *without* actually seeing him. Remember that after his resurrection, he appeared only to those who already *knew* him and already had some measure of *faith* in him. He never appeared to those who didn't believe in him. He never made a *public* appearance to convince *everyone* that he was alive again. As far as everyone outside his circle of disciples was concerned, he was dead, gone, and soon to be forgotten. The vast majority of those who eventually came to *faith* in him, then, not only in that

generation, but also ever since, have done so *without* seeing him for themselves — including us, today.

Today's reading from the Letters *also* speaks of believing without seeing. Peter writes, *Though you have not seen [Jesus], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him, and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith: the salvation of your souls* (1 Peter 1.8-9).

There's a well-known saying, "Seeing is believing". Well, I beg to differ with that. In my opinion, seeing is not *believing*; seeing is *knowing*. And there's a *difference* between believing and knowing.

Believing is always a matter of choice. We *choose* either to believe something or not to believe it. To believe something is to accept that it is true without knowing so for certain. So, when we *do* know something for certain, it's no longer a matter of belief, because the element of choice is no longer there.

In today's Gospel story, then, Thomas and the other disciples didn't just *believe* that Jesus was alive again after they had seen him; they knew it for *certain*; they knew it for a *fact*. Once they had seen Jesus for themselves, there was no *denying* that he was alive again. Once they had seen his crucifixion wounds, they knew for certain that the man who had appeared to them those two times was the same man who had died on the cross. They had no choice but to *accept* that Jesus had been raised from the dead.

It's different, though, for those who have *never* seen the risen Jesus for themselves. For them — and for *us* — the best we can do is to accept that the message of Jesus' resurrection is true without knowing for sure; in other words, the best we can do is to *believe* that Jesus really was raised from the dead. Belief is always a matter of choice. But once we have seen proof, we have no longer have any choice; we have *knowledge*; we have *certainty*.

So how do we *come* to believe that Jesus truly was raised from the dead? We do it by accepting the testimony of others, the testimony of people who *have* knowledge and certainty — that is, the testimony of those who actually *saw* the risen Jesus for themselves. And that testimony is exactly what we find in today's reading from the Book of Acts. What does Peter say to the crowd in his Pentecost sermon? *God raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of it* (Acts 2.32) — "we" being he and his fellow disciples who had seen Jesus for *themselves* following his resurrection. Peter said something similar in the passage we read last Sunday, in speaking to Cornelius and his household in Caesarea. He said, *God raised [Jesus] from the dead on the third day, and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead* (Acts 10.40-41).

It may seem like those who saw the risen Jesus for themselves had an unfair *advantage* over us who have *never* seen him. Why should they have *had* that advantage? Well, it's because it was necessary that there be *some* men and women who had *knowledge* of Jesus' resurrection — like Mary Magdalene, Peter, and Thomas — so that their testimony could be believable, trustworthy, and reliable.

Of course, it's entirely up to *us* whether or not we *accept* such testimony. Belief, after all, is a matter of *choice*. It can't be forced; it has to be voluntary. Each of us has to make the choice either to *believe* or *not* to believe for ourselves; no one else can make it for us.

No one can force *us* to believe, then, and we can't force anyone *else* to believe, either. Each person needs to make the choice for him- or herself. We may be able to *persuade* someone else to believe, but we can't *force* them to. Someone else may be able to persuade *us* to believe, but they can't force us to, either. And so, the Christian church is the community of those who have heard the testimony about Jesus and have chosen to believe it.

One of the big *mysteries* in the Christian faith is why some people *choose* to believe and others choose *not* to. People have puzzled over that question for centuries, and have come up with all kinds of possible answers. It's a complicated issue, and I don't think there's any easy answer.

The truth is that people believe what they *want* to believe, don't they? and they do so for a whole variety of reasons. Think, for example, about those who believe that COVID-19 is *not* a serious threat, and who resent the restrictions the government has placed on us. Think of those who believe that Climate Change is happening and those who *don't* believe it. Think of those who believe that Climate Change is being caused by human activity, especially the burning of carbon-based fuels, and those who believe that Climate Change is an entirely natural process, and has nothing at all to do with human activity. Think of those who believe that vaccinating children against common diseases is prudent and effective, and those who believe that vaccinating children is dangerous and harmful. We live in a skeptical age, and people are less and less deferential to authority figures of any kind; and less and less inclined to believe what religious leaders, political leaders, or even scientists say.

The Gospel writer John concludes today's reading with these words: *Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God; and that by believing, you may have life in his name* (John 20.30-31).

Belief: it's a matter of choice. We read the biblical testimony about Jesus — about both his

resurrection from the dead and his identity as the Messiah and Son of God — and we are left to decide for *ourselves* whether or not to *believe* it. May God help us to believe, then, and may he continually confirm and strengthen our faith.

## PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:

Gracious and faithful God:

On this second Sunday of Easter, we continue to rejoice in your raising Jesus from the dead. We give thanks that he appeared to his disciples and followers *after* his resurrection, so that they knew for certain that he had been raised, and so that our faith could be founded on faithful and reliable testimony. We thank you that you actually give us the choice whether to believe or not, and we pray that you would *help* us to believe, and that you would also confirm and strengthen our faith. We give you thanks also for the inheritance you have prepared for all who believe and are reconciled to you: eternal life in your kingdom in the age to come. We thank you as well for the many ways in which you use your power in the world *today* to struggle against the forces of evil and death, in order to bring about healing, restoration, reconciliation, and renewal. Enable us to have confidence in both your power and your loving purpose, so that we may face our difficulties with trust and hope.

Hear our prayers for your church around the world, in particular with the challenges it faces due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Guide and enable its leaders as they struggle to adjust to the current situation, and help all its members to continue to feel connected to each other in spite of the physical distancing that we need to practise. As we remember how Jesus' disciples went into hiding after his death because they feared persecution, we pray for Christians experiencing persecution in various parts of the world today. May they find strength, courage, and encouragement in their relationship with you, and may they not feel like you have forgotten or abandoned them.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation, and others close to us, who are experiencing difficulties and challenges of various kinds, in particular, those whom we now name before you: \_\_\_\_\_ . You know each one's situation and needs, gracious God, and we pray that your blessing, encouragement, strength, and healing power would be with each one.

As we pray for people in positions of authority this week, we pray in particular once again for those giving leadership in the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic. We give thanks for their knowledge and leadership, and we continue to pray for wisdom, strength, and stamina as they make decisions, create policies, and respond to the needs of those adversely affected.

We pray also for front-line workers in the health care system, as well as others who also put themselves at risk in order to provide the essential services we all depend on. Grant them safety, as well as strength to bear up under the additional stress that they and their families are experiencing.

We pray again for all who are adversely affected by this crisis — for those cut off from family and friends, those who are unable to work, those experiencing financial difficulty; and especially those who are sick, and the families of those who have died. Grant them all strength, guidance, healing, and comfort, according to their needs, we pray, and grant that they may receive



the tangible assistance and support they need to get through this crisis.

Grant us all hope and assurance in this crisis, we pray, so that we may not give in to feelings of anxiety; and grant us also the self-discipline we need to follow the advice we are being given for our own safety and the safety of others.

Hear our prayers, gracious God; for we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord.  
Amen.

### **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now, in peace,  
and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,  
to continue living in God's *ways* and *serving* him  
in the midst of everyday *life*.

And may God bless you:

May he help you to *believe* the biblical testimony about Jesus,  
and may he also confirm and *strengthen* your faith;  
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.