

“The Risen Jesus Sends the Church”

John 20:19-31

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter 2022; April 24, 2022

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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Jesus is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

It was the evening of the third day. It was the day that Jesus took life again and left the tomb. The disciples were gathered together—ten of them. Judas was no longer with them. Thomas was not with them on that occasion.

They had shut the doors and secured them. They did that because they were afraid. They were afraid that the chief priests and elders of the people were going to send officers to take them away, like they took Jesus away. They were afraid that they were going to do to them what they did to Jesus.

Jesus came and stood in their midst. It was not that He knocked on the door and they opened it, or something like that. He just appeared there, among them.

Jesus said, “Peace to you.”

Then He showed them His hands and His side. This was to show them who He was; that the same person who had been nailed to the cross was now alive again and standing in their midst.

They rejoiced because they saw the Lord.

Because they were joyful in seeing the Lord alive again, Jesus said again, “Peace to you.” Then He said to them, “Just as the Father has sent me, so I also send you.” But they cannot go in their own strength and in their own authority. They cannot go with their own purposes. They cannot just make things up, or think of things as human beings ordinarily would, just as the world thinks about things. When Jesus was sent by the Father, He did His Father’s will. To be sent by Jesus is to do Jesus’ will.

So Jesus breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

So we see disciples gathered together. We see Jesus standing in their midst. Jesus speaks the words of commissioning, calling the church into existence. He does this by speaking words of sending because such words are proper to a group of people. Sending speaks of a reason for being. It speaks of a purpose. With this purpose it speaks of an identity. How are these disciples, these ten scared men, gathered in that room, to see themselves? What are they to be about? In what power and authority do they go?

Here is their power and authority and their identity: “Just as the Father sent Me, so I am sending you.” The Father defines Jesus’ mission. Jesus defines the disciples’ mission. Where do they look for the purpose, for the reason, for their identity? They look to Jesus and His words; this Jesus who was nailed to a cross to carry the sins of the world; this Jesus who is now alive again to speak peace, yet now in immortality and in indestructible life.

They are going to need some very powerful help with this being sent. They are going to need the Holy Spirit’s help. They are also going to need the testimony of “it has been written,” which the Spirit will give. Jesus and the Holy Spirit are entirely consistent with each other. But while Jesus is present to the eyes and ears, and to us through His words, the Holy Spirit works on the heart and mind. As Jesus gives them the mission that is defined by Jesus, so the Holy Spirit is working on the heart and mind through the words to change them to mold them; to humble them to teach them; to convert them; to renew them, so that heart and mind, will and affection, are

aligned with being sent by Jesus.

But this alignment is not an alignment with how the world thinks, with how the flesh works out values and what it thinks is true. As the Apostle John says who was there that day: “Our faith overcomes the world” (1 John 5:4). The power of this faith is Jesus Himself who overcame the world and now breathes on His people the Holy Spirit.

With the giving of the Spirit Jesus gave them the power to forgive and retain sins. This is what Jesus calls the keys to the kingdom of heaven in Matthew 16. It is the power to open or close heaven. The key is the forgiveness of sins in Jesus; to forgive the sins of those who admit the wrong and seek forgiveness; to retain the sins of those who don’t (John 20:23). The church has this power only by Jesus giving it.

And this forgiving or retaining is sure and certain in heaven. When the sins are forgiven, they should be regarded as having been forgiven from all eternity. When the sins are retained, they should be regarded as having been retained from all eternity. This is known by the way Jesus uses the verbs for forgive and retain (John 20:23).

This office is an awesome authority and responsibility. It is not to be used arbitrarily, according to the world’s standards or sentimentality and the passions of the flesh, but according to God’s word.

This office, along with the crucified and risen Jesus, focuses the mission and identity of the church. It is about reconciliation with God which finds its center-point in the forgiveness of sins.

This office means that forgiveness is mediated by Christ through the church. Christ says it, “If *you* forgive or retain. The immediate “you” here was that group of disciples to whom He had just said, “I am sending you,” and then gave the Holy Spirit. This “you” applies to every Christian congregation. This is not some abstraction but a group of identifiable people. They are gathered in Jesus’ Name, the name Jesus Himself has given (John 20:31). Jesus’ being alive again and giving and speaking makes them who they are. They are glad because it is all about Jesus being in their midst, who once was dead but now lives. This “you” here is a Christian congregation, identified by this Jesus, given this office.

One thing became obvious to me when I was practicing law. It is that the forgiveness of sins does not exist in a law office. It does not exist in business, with respect to the conduct of business itself. It does not exist in the world. This office of the keys does not exist anywhere else on earth. It has not been given by God to any other group of people on earth than those gathered as a Christian congregation, with a specific charge and calling to forgive sins. It has not been given by God to any other group of people identified by some other name, for the church consists of those who believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and have life in His name.

But what a wonder; what a source of thanksgiving, and awesome responsibility that Jesus has given this office to such a group of people. It is also good news that He has done so because now the forgiveness of sins can be found. Now sin-wearied and grief-burdened people have a place they can go to confess for forgiveness, to hear good news of hope, for hope. To have the faith that is victory over the world, and the devil, and our own sinful flesh; the faith that is created and strengthened right here in the gathering where Jesus and the Spirit are present; faith created through the word and through the Sacrament, the things of God that Jesus has given, written, instituted, and empowered to work faith and give salvation.

But how do we know that Jesus is risen? This leads us to the story of Thomas. Thomas was at a cross-roads. He heard the other ten disciples tell him that they had seen Jesus and what Jesus had said to them (John 20:25). But Thomas did not believe them. This means that he did not yet believe that Jesus was alive again. He did not yet believe in Jesus.

Thomas was emphatic. Quite confident. Unless I see and touch His nail-pierced hands and spear-pierced side I will not believe it (John 20:25).

Eight days later, they were gathered again, and Jesus came again and stood among them. Again Jesus said, "Peace to you."

He turned to Thomas. He graciously approached Thomas on Thomas' terms. Thomas was not expecting this. Thomas had asserted such terms because he was sure that such terms could not be met. Jesus being alive again just did not fit within his paradigm, his vision and understanding of reality and what could possibly happen and be real in the physical world; and so Jesus being alive again did not fit his vision and understanding of how God works. Jesus met Him there and turned His world upside down. In this, Jesus showed Thomas who is Lord and God and brought forth from Thomas' heart and mind the confession of Jesus: "My Lord and my God!" Now Thomas is part of the congregation because he believes.

Then Jesus said words by which the congregation of His people live until He returns: "Thomas, have you believed because you have seen Me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29). Jesus blesses us who have not seen with our eyes and touched Him with our hands. Jesus blesses us who have not heard Him speak with His own voice, but have heard Jesus' testimony by the Holy Spirit through the mouths of others. We rejoice that they did see Him, and touch, Him, and hear His own voice. That became the testimony that we have heard. But Jesus blesses us for believing without seeing, but believing nonetheless.

We believe according to this: "Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples which have not been written in this book. But these have been written so that you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and so that believing, you have life in His Name" (John 20:30-31).

The risen Jesus says you are blessed for believing in Him through the testimony about Him, written and proclaimed. You are blessed here today and every day for no other reason than that you believe that Jesus of Nazareth, crucified and risen, is the Christ, the Son of God, in whom you have the forgiveness of sins and life with God; forgiveness and life which no power and no circumstance can take away from you. You are blessed because Jesus has won the victory over every created power and anything that could happen. Thus your faith in Him overcomes the world because He has overcome the world. What great joy it is then to be able to be gathered here where Christ is present with the Spirit and say today, and everyday: Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.