

Welcome to “Low Sunday” – traditionally this is the least attended service of the year. (Good to see so many here today.)

I can’t tell you how many times I have been told (along with other Pastors) that it is our job to grow the church. Quite simply, nothing could be further from the truth. And that is exactly what we see from our Gospel lesson this 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Easter. Turn with me to John 20:19-23. It is only four verses, so I would like to read it again. (READ)

The first thing that we see is the timing: “*Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week ...*” The previous verses in John 20 tell us about the resurrection of Jesus. The disciples had gone to the tomb and found it empty. Then later on we see that Jesus reveals himself to Mary Magdalene in verses 11-18. We know as we compare Scripture with Scripture that Jesus also appeared to John and Simon Peter on the Emmaus road.

This is where the Gospel record picks up and we read: “*Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week ...*” It is the evening of the day of resurrection – that first Easter day.

But there wasn’t a lot of rejoicing at the risen Christ, because the disciples and followers of Jesus did not fully understand everything that had transpired even though Jesus had told them on numerous occasions that he would rise from the dead. Just the opposite is true as we continue on: “*when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews.*”

What we see here is that everyone was hiding in the upper room where Jesus had celebrated the Passover with his disciples and instituted the Lord’s Supper. Remember, that after his arrest the disciples all fled and the only ones at the cross were the women including his mother Mary. Remember also that Peter had even denied that he knew him three times.

And so we see that they were hiding because they were afraid that the Jewish leaders would come after them next. Now, in all probability it was more than just the 10 disciples – Judas, obviously was not there, and neither was Thomas as we see if we read on – John 20:24-25 (READ). By the way, this is where the phrase “doubting Thomas” comes from!

Anyway, the disciples were probably there with the women, Mary, the mother of Jesus and his brothers, similar to what we read in Acts 1, where they were gathered after his ascension and when they choose Matthais to replace Judas.

So they were all hiding, in fear for their lives and all of a sudden: “*Jesus came and stood in the midst...*” As we read, the doors were shut because they were hiding and all of sudden they look and Jesus is standing there.

Again, this is important – the impression is that Jesus went through the door – he didn’t knock, and nobody opened it. It is important because this is a clear indication of his resurrected body – something that we as Christians will all have someday. As we read in 1 Corinthians 15, the resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15:42-44: “*So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.*”

The resurrected body of our Savior was a “spiritual body” – something that will have when we enter glory. Mine is going to be svelte!

Our Savior then greets those who are gathered with: “*Peace be with you.*” While this is an everyday greeting, it is important, because in it we do not see any rebuke of the disciples for abandoning him in his time of need.

In verse 20, Jesus shows us that it is really him and not a ghost or some apparition – “*When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.*” The wounds in his hands and side showed that it was really him – that he had really risen from the dead. At this point, the disciples were glad and they were finally starting to get it.

As the Gospel record goes on, he blesses them again – “*So Jesus said to them again, “Peace to you!”* And then here it comes: “*As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.*”

It is here that Jesus commissions them to go out and tell others that Jesus came into the world to save sinners. A fuller version is in Matthew 28:18-20: “*And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.” Amen.*” We will see more of this in a moment.

And then in Acts 1:8 we read: “*But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*”

What we know is that following the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostles took to the Gospel to all the known world. They fulfilled the commission that they had been charged with, but they did not do it under their own power, as we continue on. John 20:22: “*And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”*”

Jesus had promised them that when he left, he would give them another comforter – the Holy Spirit. It was this Spirit that raised Christ from the dead, and it is this same Spirit that empowered them to fulfill the Great Commission – to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. And indeed, it was this same Spirit that enabled them to go on in spite of intense persecution and eventual death.

And then the last thing that he did was give them the authority to declare the forgiveness of sins to those who repent: John 20:23: “*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*”

Now, this verse has been misunderstand in some churches. As we compare Scripture with Scripture we know that only God can forgive sins. We also know that He forgives the sins of those who have faith in Christ as Savior. The power that the Apostle’s had – as well as every Christian is to declare God’s judgement on sin.

It does NOT mean that God’s ministers – such as myself – have the power to forgive sins. Listen to the words closely to the words of our service: “*Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath promised forgiveness of sins to all those who with hearty repentance and true faith turn unto him: Have mercy upon you; pardon and deliver you from all your sins...*”

And in the Declaration of Absolution from Morning and Evening Prayer we read partially: “... *hath given power, and commandment, to his Ministers, to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins. He pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.*”

Notice the key words: *who with heartly repentance and true faith turn unto him ... to declare and pronounce to his people, being penitent, the Absolution and Remission of their sins.* And then notice clearly: *He* (that is, God) *pardoneth and absolveth all those who truly repent, and unfeignedly believe his holy Gospel.*

Forgiveness of sins is based on repentance and faith, not on the power of a minister or priest. Again, only God can forgive sins.

So now we ask, what does this mean for all of us as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians. Simply put, every single Christian is also sent into the world to proclaim the Gospel – the Good News that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Simply, we believe that there is only one way of salvation, and that those without Christ are open to the wrath and judgement of God – then we need to tell others about Jesus.

And for those of us who have faith in Christ as Savior, we have the same power – the same Holy Spirit – that those first Apostle’s did. Again, the same Spirit that had the power to raise Christ from the dead is in everyone of us, and it gives us the power to tell others about Jesus Christ.

Remember, it is God who does the saving, but we have been given the responsibility to tell others, and let God do the rest. And also remember, that we have been told not to make converts, but to “*make disciples*” – that is, true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ. As we read in St. Matthew 28: *teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you.*

We have all been sent – not just those with collars or those who have gone to Seminary. So, if we want the church to grow, I only have one thing to say: GET BUSY!