

Pastor Joe Polzin
 John 20:19-31
 “Seeing Jesus, Our Foundation”
 Year B – Second Sunday of Easter
 April 8, 2017

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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

We still continue the wonderful celebration of our Lord’s resurrection, proclaiming that he is alive! Last week, we heard how the risen Christ is both our temporal and eternal home. He has returned us from our exile to our home with him. His resurrection sealed the deal, sealed his victory over sin and death for us. And he has brought us to himself, he has brought us eternally home.

And so, continuing with this home metaphor, what is necessary for a strong home? What is the first thing you must do before your home is built? Lay a foundation. A foundation is what everything is built upon. Without it, nothing can stand. And so, what we hear today from our Gospel reading is Jesus with his disciples on that first Easter Sunday. But *before* Jesus appears to them, the disciples were feeling quite *foundation-less*, reeling from the things they witnessed on the Friday before, as their Lord and Savior was betrayed, captured, and crucified.

Did you notice how the reading began? “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews...” (20:19). Despite the reports from the women that Jesus was alive, the disciples were still hunkered down behind locked doors, out of fear. They were afraid for their own lives. They were afraid that the Jewish leaders who had killed Jesus would be after them next. Before seeing Jesus themselves, they felt they had nothing to stand upon, so they were isolated, afraid, and silent.

And then Jesus appears to them. And the first word out of his mouth was, “*Peace...* Peace be with you.” Jesus appearing to them wasn’t necessarily a happy moment. It wasn’t a *Gospel* moment until Jesus said that one word, “Peace.” Remember, *they* had been the ones who betrayed him, the ones who denied him, the ones who deserted him. Jesus’ reappearance could have been a moment of reckoning and terror. But it wasn’t. Jesus says what his appearance means.... “Peace.”

And their fear immediately turned into gladness and joy, as they were once again with their Lord, now raised from the dead, seeing for themselves the marks in his hands and his side, proving that this was indeed him.

Except one of the disciples wasn’t with them, and we all know who it was. *Thomas* wasn’t there. And when the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord,” infamously Thomas said, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and placed my hand into his side, I will *never* believe” (20:25).

We often call him Doubting Thomas, but you’ll notice, he didn’t say, “[Unless I see the marks for myself...] I’m going to *doubt* it....” No, he said, “[Unless I see the marks for myself...] I will never *believe*.”

Thomas was struggling not simply with doubt, but rather with *unbelief*. He was having a crisis of faith. He had lost the foundation of his faith when Christ had died, and now he felt he had nothing upon which to stand. He was, in that moment, *Unbelieving* Thomas. *Foundation-less*

Thomas. *Faith-less* Thomas. Which is an eternally consequential sin. But one that Thomas felt trapped within.

And we may ask, is it fair for us to come down so hard on Thomas? After all, shouldn't we have described the other ten disciples in the same way? One verse before our Gospel reading began, Mary Magdalene comes to them and says, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18). And the disciples didn't say, "Oh, great! Can't wait to see him." No, they responded by locking the doors and remaining afraid. *They* were not convinced until *they* saw Jesus, pierced hands, side, and all!

And those ten disciples tell Thomas, "We have seen the Lord," and Thomas responds just as they did at first, with unbelief. I'm sure Thomas' heart desired nothing more than to believe that his Lord was alive, but unless he saw Jesus in the flesh, he wasn't going to believe it. Thomas wouldn't regain his foundation of faith, or his faith at all, unless the Lord came to him to give him proof.

We live in a world that demands proof for things before faith is given. It's a "I'll believe it when I see it" kind of world. Think of all our daily interactions where this is true. There's a lack of faith in this world, a lack of trust. Some would call this skepticism, others would just say they're being realistic. Still others will say, and this is a hard one for us to hear, that they're being wise and intelligent.

For example, the well-known British scientist and atheist, Stephen Hawking, who also had ALS, just recently died. His funeral was widely publicized. His impact is still being talked about on the news. And Hawking made no secret that he was critical of people with faith. He stated on a TV program once, "There is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate... There is probably no heaven, and no afterlife either. We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe." Elsewhere, he described the concept of an afterlife as a "fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

And it sounds so rational and intelligent, doesn't it? For Hawking, science was his foundation. Because he couldn't personally see God or prove his existence, he was willing to build his life, and his eternal life, or lack thereof, based solely on a God-less understanding of the world. For him, science conveniently eliminated the need for God, and so science then became his god, his ultimate foundation.

In various ways, we live in a world of Doubting, and even, Unbelieving Thomases. People who choose to doubt what God has shown through Christ, and instead believe in what they can produce with their own hands or observe with their own eyes.

And this can begin to get a little uncomfortable for us Christians, whose foundation of faith is in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord. But even though *we* stand on this rock-solid foundation, we live in a culture that has an increasingly hard time accepting such things. They can even make what sounds like reasonable-sounding arguments against them.

And this can weigh heavy on us, because although we are not *of* this unbelieving world, we are still living in it. And the devil would like nothing more than to have us begin to believe that our foundation of faith isn't as firm as we thought it was. He has us wondering if there's just the smallest crack in it. And if there's a crack in what we believe, well, then who's to say the whole thing doesn't just come tumbling down? Like I said, it can get a little uncomfortable. And we may not like to admit it, but we may even be thinking to ourselves, "Yeah, I'd like to see the mark of the nails and the pierced side, as well."

Eight days later, Jesus appeared to them again, this time, while Thomas was there. And just as he did when he saw the other ten, the first word Jesus said to them was "*Peace... Peace*"

be with you.” And he turned to Thomas, and said, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe” (20:26-27).

And Scripture doesn't say, but I wonder what Thomas felt when his eyes first saw his Lord's face. Joy? Fear? Guilt? Shame? A mixture of all of those things, probably. Thomas' foundation of faith had been shattered and lay in ruins. He had spoken out of sin and unbelief. But Jesus didn't come to him in anger or condemnation. Jesus graciously accommodated Thomas' request, as he came to restore him, and restore the foundation under his feet once more.

And Thomas regained his faith, as he responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” That's why the resurrection of Jesus is so important; it isn't only the foundation of our faith, it's also the power that creates our faith. It shows for certain that Christ's sacrifice on our behalf, for all our sins, was acceptable to his Father in heaven. It shows for certain that Jesus has been given the power over death. And it shows us for certain that Christ has shared this hope for new life with us.

As Thomas found out, when the risen Lord comes to you in peace, he forgives all your sin and unbelief, restores and strengthens your faith, and gives you the hope of salvation for eternity. He lays for you a foundation unlike any other.

But we may wonder, does this apply to me, and how can I know? What about Christians now 2,000 years later, who didn't get the chance to *see* Jesus in his resurrected body?

It appears Jesus was expecting this very response, because he said to Thomas, and all the disciples, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Jesus was talking about every Christian who would believe from his ascension on. Every Christian who *wouldn't* see him, but would still believe. And that includes *you*. *You* were on our Lord's mind as he was speaking those words, “Blessed are *you*...”

And although Christ knew he was going to be ascending to heaven soon, to take his place at God's right hand, he had already prepared his disciples for his departure. That's why he appeared to them, to restore their faith and their foundation. And he promised the Holy Spirit, who would comfort them, help them, and counsel them as they proclaimed to all nations the forgiveness of sins through their risen Lord, Jesus Christ. And upon that foundation, Jesus was going to build his Church.

The disciple, John, writes, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but 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” (20:30-31).

In our Epistle Reading, John again writes, “That which was from the beginning...” and he's talking about Jesus here (!)... the second person of the Trinity... the Word of God, which John says, “Which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands...” (1 John 1:1). I wonder if John was thinking back to that moment when Jesus appeared to them. And John goes on to say, this person Christ was “made manifest” among them, and now they are making him manifest among the nations by proclaiming him.

Christ planned for this testimony to be shared about him, this Word of God, to be passed down faithfully one generation to the next, every generation until today, by the preaching of the Word, so that we would know this Word of Life. And although you may not have seen Jesus with your eyes, he has been manifest among you, and you certainly have met him.

Jesus came to you in Baptism, as he reached out and claimed you as his own, personally and lovingly. He continues to come to you in his Word, as it you read it and hear it proclaimed, hearing the very voice of God speak life to you. You hear his personal forgiveness every time

your pastor says, “As a called and ordained servant of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore forgive you all your sins.” Jesus comes to you in Holy Communion, as you hold and taste his very body and blood, for the forgiveness of your sins, and the strengthening of your faith. The risen Lord still comes to you, in many ways, and says to you, “Peace be with you,” so that the foundation of your faith is strong and sure.

And what’s more, brothers and sisters in Christ, there will be a day, filled with glory, when you *will* see Jesus face-to-face. He will look at you, with compassion in his eyes, and say to you, “Peace be with you.” And he’ll show you the marks in his hands, and place your hand upon his side, and you’ll know quite well, you’ll recognize your Lord and God.

This foundation is yours today. And that’s what we celebrate this Second Sunday of Easter. Our sure foundation, Jesus Christ our Lord. And the beautiful thing about the foundation of our risen Lord is that it is not an empty or idle foundation. It’s a foundation upon which God is building up His kingdom through His Church, through us. That’s the charge the disciples received, as a once fearful group of doubting people turned into a faithful group of believing witnesses, despite what that meant for their own personal safety, because they knew their inheritance was secure in heaven.

Now, it’s *every* Christian’s task, our task, after experiencing and meeting Jesus in our own lives, and with the certain hope that one day we will see him face-to-face, to then help this doubting and unbelieving world to see him, as well. They see him through us, as we show others by word and deed how beautiful it is to live with Jesus, and to know we will live for all eternity with our risen Lord, who is the foundation of our faith. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.