

Sermon 4-12-26
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Based on the Gospel Lesson for The 2nd Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31.
Also on Luke 24:33-49.

The Spirit Opens Minds

When I was in sixth or seventh grade — somewhere around that age — the church I attended called an assistant pastor — a tall, trim and handsome young man. As far as I was concerned, he had an air of authority about him. In fact, he made me think about entering the ministry.

So, it was the Sunday after Easter, like today. The senior pastor had preached on Easter and the assistant took the pulpit for what is referred to as Low Sunday. It's called that for a reason. For, many who make the effort to attend on Easter Sunday feel they have received sufficient holiness for quite a while — maybe even for the whole year. So, only the people you can count on to be in church every Sunday attend on the Sunday after Easter. And even some of them take a break. That's why it's called Low Sunday.

Anyway, the assistant pastor preached a fiery sermon that day. He began with the words, "How dare you?" It's too long ago. So I can't remember exactly. But I sort of remember he challenged the people who showed up that Sunday with a "how dare you come back?". All I remember for sure is that he repeated the phrase "How dare you?", several times and the congregation was all abuzz after service — as you can imagine.

Now, if you're going to preach a sermon on Low Sunday that criticizes people for not being in church, you're preaching to the wrong crowd. That's a sermon for Easter Sunday, as in how dare you people show up when we haven't seen you all year?! So, knowing the mistake of the young assistant pastor, let me tell you instead how glad I am to see all of you who made the trip today, this second Sunday of Easter!

Now, there's an interesting feature about Low Sunday. It's similar to some of the other festivals we celebrate like the Baptism of Jesus and the Transfiguration in that we get the same gospel lesson every year. However, this Sunday doesn't have a special name. But it could be called something like St. Thomas the Doubter Sunday. Because every year, the same gospel lesson about St. Thomas appears.

If you remember, last year I preached a Lenten series that focused on the one thing Jesus had to do in order to win salvation for us. He absolutely could not do the thing Satan had done and that Satan had deceived Adam and Eve into doing — namely grasping at equality with God. In order to win salvation for us, Jesus had to follow the life-script written for Messiah in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. He could not deviate from it in even the smallest way. He could not write His own life-script as Messiah. In last year's sermon series, we recounted the multiple temptations that Satan threw at Jesus — trying to lure Him into writing His own Messiah life-script. However, to His dying breath, Jesus remained true to what is written about Messiah in Scripture. Therefore, Yahweh, the Father, for our sake, rewarded Jesus for His loving, perfect obedience with resurrected, righteous, eternal life in an immortal human body — the first human to be resurrected from the dead.

If you remember, last year in that Lenten series I also called the struggle between Jesus and Satan the greatest contest ever played in the whole creation. Each Sunday in Lent I invited you all to get out your popcorn and soda as we went play by play through the greatest game ever played. But then, as we crossed over into the Sundays of Easter, we noted that with His resurrection, Jesus had successfully won the first three quarters of the game. Thus, for the fourth quarter, Jesus went to the bench and put a fresh team on the field — His Church. Therefore, ever since, it's been up to us to play the fourth quarter for however long it takes until Jesus comes back on the field for the final victory lap at the very end of the game — the great Day of the Lord.

Now, at the beginning of His three year ministry Jesus chose a team — the twelve. They were with Him as He played the first three quarters. However, the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, made it abundantly clear that even after all that time with Jesus, the twelve and the other disciples were still woefully unprepared to play the fourth quarter. One of them betrayed Jesus. Another denied Jesus three times. The others ran away and didn't know what to think or do.

However, something of the greatest significance happened on Easter Sunday evening. All who were gathered in the upper room that night were powerfully commissioned by Jesus to play the fourth quarter. We covered all this last week, but John 20:19-22 appears as part of the gospel lesson for today. So, again let's go over what happened.

First, we turn to Jesus' appearance Easter evening as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. We begin with Luke 24:33-37, "33 And they [the two disciples who had been on the road to Emmaus with Jesus] found the eleven and those who were with them gathered together, 34 saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!' 35 Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he [Jesus] was known to them in the breaking of the bread. 36 As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, 'Peace to you!' 37 But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit." This only makes sense. If suddenly a person who hadn't been in a room with you were to bodily materialize out of thin air, wouldn't you be terrified that you were seeing a ghost? Therefore, the first thing Jesus had to do was convince the disciples that He had been bodily resurrected from the dead.

Luke 24:38-43, "38 And he [Jesus] said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.' 40 And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. 41 And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, 'Have you anything here to eat?' 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them."

What can we gather from Jesus' appearance in the room? First, resurrected, immortal human bodies are real human bodies. They have flesh and bone just like these mortal bodies. Apparently, resurrected human bodies also eat. Ghosts don't do that. Spirits don't have flesh and bone, especially with nail scars on them.

The fact that Yahweh, the Son, was incarnate of the Virgin Mary in a genuine mortal human body and He was resurrected from the dead in a genuine immortal human body, tells us a great deal about our Creator's attitude toward these human bodies in which we live. They are the absolute apex of His creation. This understanding is also supported by Genesis. For, humans were the very last creatures that Yahweh created. We are the apex. Our marvelous bodies are the apex of Yahweh's creation.

But look at what Adam's Original Sin and our own personal sins have done. These bodies fall sick. They age. We beat them up through improper living and sexual immorality. Accidents can happen. Our bodies can cause us great pain. Ultimately, they die. All this shows us the terrible power of sin — how it brought judgment down upon our flesh.

Nevertheless, Yahweh isn't having any of this. He sent His Son in the flesh into the world of flesh to redeem flesh — to buy our bodies back from death. It says so in Romans 8:23-24, "23. . . we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved."

Understand this. At the close of the age, every human will be resurrected in an immortal human body — even those who will stupidly follow Satan into the Lake of Fire that Jesus says in Matthew 25:41 is prepared not for us, but for "the devil and his angels." Indeed, our task in the church is to make ourselves and everyone else aware that there is a path that leads to eternal death. Our task is to get all we can off that path and onto the path that leads to eternal life.

But back to Easter Sunday evening. After everyone was satisfied that Jesus was no ghost, we read this in Luke 24:44-49, "44 Then he [Jesus] said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled. 45 Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, 46 and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, 47 and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.'"

First, Jesus unequivocally told the apostles and us that a life-script for Messiah was inserted into Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms — what we call the Old Testament. Second, Jesus told the apostles and us that He perfectly fulfilled Messiah's life-script. Perfectly. He never grasped at equality with God. Third, Jesus told them and us the glorious result of His life work — that in Jesus' Name, Yahweh has proclaimed a life giving repentance and forgiveness of sins to all who live on earth. Indeed, there is a most definite change of life direction for everyone who undergoes real forgiveness of sins. We see this first in the testimonies of the apostles and then, in the testimonies of countless thousands down through the ages — even into our time.

Fourth, on Easter evening, Jesus commissioned the apostles to preach the Gospel of repentance and forgiveness of sins in His Name to all nations. That's how all of us get here this morning. Fifth, Jesus told the apostles to wait for the Holy Spirit, not only to fall on them, but on all who would truly repent and enter the Kingdom of God.

Then sixth, and most importantly, Jesus opened their minds to see and understand Messiah's life-script hidden in plain sight in Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. For, from the time Peter confessed Jesus to be Messiah, Jesus had taught His apostles and disciples that the life-script for Messiah demands suffering, death and resurrection. But, they couldn't receive it or believe it. Indeed, we read of Peter's reaction the first time Jesus taught this in Matthew 16:22-23, "22 And Peter took him [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.' 23 But he turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.'" That was pretty severe. But a suffering Messiah was totally beyond the grasp of Peter's understanding at that point.

Even on Easter afternoon it was beyond the grasp of the two disciples that Jesus walked and talked with on the road to Emmaus. But the situation radically changed on Easter evening when Jesus opened the disciples' minds and ours to understand everything written about Messiah in the Old Testament.

And just a reminder here. The Old Testament is a Jewish book. For that matter, so is the New Testament. Jesus was Jewish. The apostles and disciples were Jewish. Salvation is from the Jews. There's no question about it.

But back to Easter evening. How did Jesus open the disciples' minds and ours to understand everything written about Messiah in the Old Testament? The answer is found in the first part of this morning's gospel lesson. John 20:19-23 is another account of what took place in the upper room on Easter evening. John 20:19-23, "19 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, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' 20 When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.' 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.'"

Here, as in the account from Luke, Jesus materialized out of nowhere in the middle of the upper room. He had to show His disciples evidence that He was not a ghost. Just like in Luke's account, we read in John that Jesus commissioned the apostles and disciples to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to all nations. Jesus gave them authority to grant forgiveness of sins to the penitent and authority to withhold forgiveness of sins from hard hearted impenitents.

Most importantly, the authority Jesus gave them came from Lord Holy Spirit. Now, because we're told in Acts 2:4 that the apostles were filled with the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, we usually think of that day as the one on which the apostles received the Holy Spirit. However, here on Easter evening, John tells us that Jesus breathed Lord Holy Spirit into the apostles. That's how He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. And that's how He still does so for all of us who come after the apostles.

The Old and New Testaments have only one purpose — to create saving faith in the hearts of those who read them and hear them preached. However, without Lord Holy Spirit, those who read Holy Scripture can't receive that faith — just like the apostles couldn't prior to Easter evening. On the other hand, with Lord Holy Spirit, even a small child can get saving faith from the Holy Scriptures.

Now, finally, we come to Saint Thomas. To understand Thomas, we've got to understand how the plan of salvation works. So we turn to John 14:21-23. In this passage, pay attention to the word "manifest" which means to show or to reveal. John 14:21-23, "21 [Jesus said,] 'Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him.' 22 Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?' 23 Jesus answered him, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.'" Here we see Jesus make a distinction between the rebellious people of the world and those whom the Father has called to love Jesus.

Now, to both His enemies and His disciples, Jesus left a testimony about His resurrection from the dead that stands to this day. There is no body in the tomb of Jesus Christ. It's empty. That's Jesus' general testimony to the world, and it's all the testimony unbelievers will ever get.

On the other hand, Jesus did show Himself alive and bodily resurrected, but only to a select group of those who loved Him. And as we saw in Luke 24:48, Jesus commissioned this select group who saw Him alive to be eyewitnesses ready to testify to all nations what they had seen and heard.

Now, here we come to something absolutely important. After Jesus' ascension into heaven, He did not show Himself alive to anyone else except the Apostle Paul. Therefore, after Jesus' ascension, the only way for anyone to believe that Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead was through the testimony of His appointed eyewitnesses. This was true even for the first 3,000 Jewish believers who came to faith on the Day of Pentecost 33A.D. None of them saw Jesus alive. Yet, they believed. They believed the testimony of those who had seen Jesus alive. This is how the plan of salvation is meant to work.

Now, we read in today's gospel that for some reason Thomas was not present with the other apostles and disciples when Jesus revealed Himself on Easter evening. But when Thomas finally joined the others, they excitedly testified to him what they had seen and heard. Therefore, Thomas could have become the very first person ever to come to faith in the resurrected Messiah Jesus by the testimony of the eyewitnesses. He could have become the first person ever won to faith by the plan of salvation. But it was not to be so.

We have to understand something obvious. The Lord meant Thomas to be one of His apostles. Therefore, if Thomas was going to fulfill the commission Jesus gave the apostles to be His eyewitnesses, Thomas had to see Jesus physically resurrected from the dead. Thus, Thomas' resistance to the testimony of the other apostles may have been simply because he was miffed that somehow he had been left out.

It could have been that Thomas was simply stubborn about things that are wildly out of the ordinary, like a bodily resurrection from the dead in an immortal body. However, Thomas had seen Jesus' friend, Lazarus, resuscitated from death after four days in the grave. So, Thomas knew that wild things were possible with Jesus. For that reason, I go with the theory that Thomas was miffed — miffed with Jesus for leaving him out.

In any event, Thomas resisted being the first person converted by eyewitness testimony. He even set the terms on which he would believe — John 20:25, "... 'Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.'"

Now, the grace of God is evident in what Jesus did for Thomas. For, when Jesus' enemies set the terms for their belief, "come down from the cross and we will believe," Jesus in no way accommodated them. But on the Sunday after Easter, Jesus came to Thomas and graciously accepted his demands by saying to him in John 20:27, "... 'Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.'"

 That is marvelous grace.

And so we come to the really important part. John 20:28-29, "28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.'"

First, with a simple “My Lord and my God!”, we see all of Thomas’ resistance and bravado instantly collapse. “My Lord and my God!” This is what a loyal subject says as he bows his knee to His beloved King.

Have you ever abandoned yourself, bowed your knee to Jesus and said from your heart, “My Lord and my God!”? Try it some time. But you and I will have to do so without Jesus bodily present. For Jesus said, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” If we bow the knee and utter loyalty to our Lord and God, it can only be on the basis of the testimony of those who saw Jesus bodily resurrected.

There’s an entry in the Guinness Book of World Records about an early 20th century lawyer from Guyana named Sir Lionel Luckhoo. He successfully defended 242 murder cases and never lost one. He was an expert on eyewitness testimony, able to detect lying testimony. He thoroughly studied all the material available about the lives of the apostles and came to the conclusion that none of them were lying about what they saw and heard. In addition, even the most skeptical modern scholars now recognize as historical reality that the church was preaching Jesus crucified and bodily resurrected within two years of the events.

Therefore, blessed are we if we will believe the eyewitness testimony. And for however long the fourth quarter lasts, we are to proclaim that eyewitness testimony to the world. Jesus is risen from the dead! He is risen indeed! Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV.