

April 23, 2017 – Acts 5:29-42, 1 Peter 1:3-9, & John 20:19-31

It can be surprising and maybe even a little discouraging to look at all the different ways that Christianity has fragmented over the centuries. So many different denominations. So many different church bodies. Can't we all just work together for once, and not argue about doctrine?

Unfortunately... no. That's not really an option. Because so many of our differences come about because we're looking at scripture in entirely different ways.

I mean, you've got groups that see scripture as teaching us a means to physical wealth and prosperity. Follow these rules and God will shower you with every blessing you can ask for. You've got groups that see scripture as a rule book that must be followed precisely. Disobey one law, one commandment, and you're out of God's kingdom. You've got groups that see scripture as a path to personal peace and enlightenment. Jesus, like all great teachers, was just trying to open our minds to love our neighbor.

And then you've got us. Who look at scripture and see... a story. A true story. A very well-crafted story. A story written down by human hands. And yet a story that has God as it's author. And everything in that story is there for a reason. All of it fits together like a puzzle. Revealing one final message.

A message called the Gospel. And that's really, really important. Because it's so easy to make the message of the Bible about the Law. That's what all those other groups that I described do. Do this, and you will be blessed. Do this, or God will punish you. Do this, and the world will make sense. Do this, do this, do this. It's all Law. It's all about us and what we do.

But that's not the message that God's Word actually presents. And on this second Sunday of Easter, our lessons are full of this true message. Over and over again, we hear that the story of the Bible is not our obedience to God. The story of the Bible is God forgiving us.

We hear it in our first lesson. Peter and the apostles are filled with the Holy Spirit and with the joy of the resurrection. They are preaching. They are baptizing. They are performing miracles wherever they go. And the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem are getting upset. They crucified Jesus to get rid of this kind of talk. And now it's only growing.

So they arrest the apostles. They throw them in prison. But even prison walls can't contain their "words of Life." An angel frees them and encourages them to continue preaching their message. Finally, the Jewish leaders drag them before the council. They order them to be silent.

But Peter defies them, "*We must obey God rather than men,*" he insists. But why? What's the point? Why is this message of the resurrection so crucial?

Well, as Peter says, because it proclaims that God has given repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. None of it would matter. Old Testament. New Testament. The Law. The Prophets. The crucifixion. The resurrection. None of it would make a bit of difference if it didn't mean that God is forgiving and God has forgiven you.

The same is true of our Gospel lesson. Here we have Thomas. Old doubting Thomas. Who did a lot more than doubt. Doubt is a kind word. Doubt implies that you could go either way. That you believe, but maybe not fully. You believe, but you could grant the possibility that it might not be true. Many of us have moments of doubt. Yet, fundamentally, we still believe.

In contrast, here's Thomas: "*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.*" Those are not the words of doubt. Those are the words of denial. If you tried to talk to someone about your faith and they responded by saying, "Unless God shows up here and slaps me in the face, I will NEVER believe," we wouldn't call them doubting. We'd call them an atheist.

Except that, in Thomas's case, God really does show up and slap him in the face, so to speak. In God's infinite grace, He gives Thomas the proof that He doesn't give most people. "*Do not disbelieve, but believe,*" he says to Thomas.

But believe... what? That Jesus is alive? Sure. For Thomas that was a big part of it. But there's more to it than that. St John spells it out for us in the very next verses. *“These things 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.”*

Believing that Jesus is alive is only part of the equation. To believe that, we don't need to believe Jesus. We only need to believe the apostle John. If you believe John, then you won't be a doubting Thomas. Or atheist Thomas, as the case may be. You'll believe that Jesus rose from the dead and that will probably lead you to believe that Jesus is the Christ and the Son of God.

All good things. But only the first step. The second step is that by believing you may have life in his name. And that's an even bigger step to take.

Because believing that you have life in his name means, first, recognizing that you're dead. Apart from Christ you are spiritually dead. Apart from Christ you will wither away. With no hope of anything but the grave.

Apart from these “words of Life,” as Peter earlier calls them, you are nothing but a person of death, body and soul. You are dead in your sins. You are dead in your disobedience. You are dead in your disloyalty. You are dead in your defiance.

Apart from these words of Life, you can read scripture and do this and do that and do the other thing. And you might be blessed. You might self-righteously keep a few commandments. You might find a little enlightenment and love for your neighbor. But, in the end, you're still dead and dying. That's the problem with relying on the Law. At its worst, it leads to death. And at its best, it leads to death.

Only if God forgives can there be something more than death. Only if God shows infinite grace and mercy to people who deserve death can there be words of life. Only if we believe in a God of Gospel can Jesus' death and resurrection mean that we have life in His name.

This is what Peter's talking about in our Epistle lesson today. *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”*

A living hope. Not a dead hope based on the teachings of a dead man that lead only to death. A living hope. Because the one we follow is still alive. And will live forevermore.

And because Christ lives forevermore, the hope we hold onto is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us. The hope we have lives in the risen body of our Lord. As long as he lives, our hopes lives. Even if we go through times of trial. Even if we grieve. Even if we are tested by fire.

Even if we get the exact opposite of what all these teachers of the Law try to promise us. With their wealth and pride and enlightenment. The final result for us is the revelation of Jesus Christ. The revelation of his love and his redemption and the salvation of our souls.

You see, if the Bible is just a book of rules and commandments and laws, then the story is already over. The story was over for the Pharisees. Jesus was dead. They cut off the head, the body will die. Just like Gamaliel said. The story was over for Thomas. Jesus was dead. It was all a lie. There's nothing to believe in.

But the story isn't over. The story is just getting started. For Jesus lives. And he has sent us to proclaim these words of Life to a dying world. That can't see Jesus' hands and feet, like Thomas did. Can't hear Jesus' message of salvation, like Peter did.

But they can see us, working together as his hands and feet. They can hear us, preaching this good news. Though they have not seen him, through us, they can come to love him. And rejoice with us with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory. As we all together obtain the outcome of our faith. The salvation of our souls. Amen.