

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

What a glorious Easter feast we celebrated last Sunday! Christ is risen!
Alleluia! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!

But we're not done, for Easter is so big that it cannot be celebrated for a single day only. Greater than Christmas which has its 12 day season, Easter begins a season that goes for seven weeks. Thus, today's texts continue the resurrection theme of Easter. Luke, the author of Acts, tells us, "*with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*" And in the Gospel, the Evangelist tells us that, "*On the evening of that day, the first day of the week,*" Jesus appeared to the disciples. "*That day,*" is the day of Jesus' resurrection.

Actually, John says that "*Jesus came and stood*" in their midst. I used the word "appeared" moments ago, but that sounds too ethereal — even ghostly. Jesus wants none of those kinds of thoughts for He "*showed them his hands and his side.*" It was He in the flesh there before them; He had risen physically from the dead.

The crucified One had only three days before hung from a cross and, I think still with a loud voice, proclaimed, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30). It was finished — Satan, death, and sin were defeated. The filthy task of bearing our sin in His innocent flesh was finished. He completed it for us and for our salvation. For us the Righteous One became sin; for us the Almighty One became weak; for us the Eternal One died. As Luther reminds us, the Son became what He was not in order that He might make US what WE ARE NOT: righteous, saints bound for heaven.

And now in our Gospel, it was the evening of the third day. Jesus had risen from the dead and had shown himself to Mary (Jn. 20:14-18) and to Simon (Lk. 24:34), yet the stories of Jesus rising from the dead seemed too much like an idle tale, and so, as Luke says, "*they did not believe them*" (Lk. 24:11).

Thus, Jesus came to them that evening. Closed doors and locked rooms could not hold him back any more than a stone rolled over His tomb, or guards standing watch, or an official seal on the tomb could hold him in. The living Jesus came to the disciples in their fear, and, standing among them, overcame that fear by showing them His wounds and by offering them words of peace and forgiveness and office.

"*Peace be with you,*" Jesus said as He showed them His hands and side. They were glad to see Him. "*Peace be with you,*" Jesus said again. These are important words — Jesus repeated them. These are important words still for us. Listen for them in the Divine Service as we plead for peace and as peace is bestowed upon us.

In the Gospel, Jesus connects these words of peace to the forgiveness of sins. He told His church cowering there in that locked room, *“If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness, it is withheld.”* For the forgiveness that Jesus won by His bloody cross, not counting our sins against us, reconciling us to Himself, establishing peace with God, must also be delivered to us. Luther teaches it this way: “We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament [he means also not in baptism or preaching or the speaking of absolution]. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word” (LW40, 213-14).

Therefore, also with these words, Jesus established an office from which to distribute His blood-bought forgiveness — through the Spirit. For Jesus *“breathed on His disciples and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’”* By these words, Jesus instituted the Office of the Keys, that is, the Office of the Holy Ministry, and by these words we *“believe that, when the called minister of Christ deals with us by His Divine command”* — forgiving and retaining sins — *“this is as valid and certain, in heaven also, as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us himself”* (Luther, Small Catechism, “Office of the Keys, What Do You Believe ...”). Thus, the Church calls men and ordains them into this Office, authorizing them publicly to forgive and bind sins and to bestow Christ’s peace upon the faithful.

This is what this one Divinely-instituted office is all about — Jesus instituted it that forgiveness of sins may be bestowed, that faith may be wrought by the Holy Spirit, that Jesus may be confessed as Lord and God, that peace may reign. This is the peace won by Christ *“Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification”* (Rom. 4:25). Christ’s atoning sacrifice brought peace through the forgiveness of sins, not only for us, but also for the sins of the whole world. *“It is finished.”* Moreover, as I just discussed, though we are removed from the cross by time and space, this forgiveness is delivered to us by Word and sacrament — it’s a work of the Holy Spirit especially through the pastoral office.

Nevertheless, Lutherans confess, the Word and sacraments are not efficacious in us apart from faith. Lutherans affirm both the objective reality of Christ’s sacrifice and the instruments by which the blessings of the cross are bestowed, and the importance of an individual believing in order to receive the benefits of this grace. That’s why Paul says that righteousness is *“counted to us who believe in”*

Christ crucified and risen (Rom. 4:24), and why Paul continues, “*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*” (Rom. 5:1). You know well that Lutherans proclaim salvation through faith alone, but as important as that message is, we also confess that faith does not belong to the essence of the Word or the sacraments. Rather, faith receives the grace God proffers. Speaking of Baptism, for example, Luther says, “Without faith it profits nothing, even though Baptism is in itself a divine overwhelming treasure” (Luther, Large Catechism, Part 4, 34).

Thus, although Christ died for Thomas and rose again, and although the objective Good News was proclaimed to Thomas, who was absent that evening of Jesus’ resurrection — “*We have seen the Lord.*” He is risen from the dead — none of it was of benefit to Thomas for he refused to believe. “*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.*”

This would change, for a week later Jesus came again to the disciples — this time Thomas with them; and again, standing in the midst, Jesus said, “*Peace be with you.*” This time He confronted Thomas’ unbelief. “Come here, Thomas, and bring your fingers and hands with you. Look at my hands; shove your hand in my side. Stop with your faithlessness; believe.” And, Thomas did: he believed and confessed, “*My Lord and my God.*”

Jesus didn’t scold Thomas afterward, but He did instruct him about you and me and all who would follow after him, for we don’t have the opportunity to see and believe. And Jesus did not leave us without the means necessary for faith, for Jesus left us with the words and signs by which the Holy Spirit brings us to faith and gives us life, for faith comes not by seeing but hearing Christ’s word — in preaching, baptizing, absolving, eating and drinking. When we are blessed to believe this word, we are accounted righteous before God, and we have peace.

Yes, Easter continues: “*with great power [we continue to bear witness] to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace [is] upon [us] all,*” grace filled with peace and forgiveness, office and faith. Blessed are we in Jesus who lives! Christ is risen! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit