

Quasimodogeniti, the Second Sunday of Easter
March 30, 2008

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

AS NEWBORN BABES

Ezekiel 37:1-14, I John 5:4-12, John 20:19-31

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in the account in the Gospel lesson spans from Easter Sunday through today, a week later, the second Sunday of Easter. The events of that first Easter Sunday were so momentous that almost no one believed them at first. The women at the tomb, though having seen it empty and having heard the angel's words that Christ had risen from the dead, still did not believe at first. They fled the tomb in fear and confusion. It is not until they meet Jesus in person, Mary Magdalene in the garden by the tomb, and the other women on the road, that they come to believe fully what has happened. The disciples too, though Peter and John saw the empty tomb and though all heard the women's words and received the testimony of the disciples who were walking to Emmaus, did not at first believe. It is not until they themselves see Jesus alive that they are completely convinced of His resurrection and put their trust in it. St. Mark summarizes it: "Now when He rose early on the first day of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe. After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told it to the rest, but they did not believe them either. Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen." Yes it is not until Jesus Himself appears to them, coming in through closed doors, yet standing in their midst alive and in the flesh, that they at last believe.

The eleven then bear witness to Thomas who was not with them that Easter Sunday. John tells us that they say to him: "'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.'" Thomas has gotten a bum rap for this, of course, being known as "doubting Thomas"; but while he might have been a little more emphatic in his unbelief, at the root it is really no different than the unbelief exhibited by all of the disciples initially. He will not believe unless he has seen for himself, has seen and handled Jesus body, a body he had seen hung up to die, a body pierced with nails and with spear, and buried in a tomb. Perhaps he thought the others were suffering from some kind of mass delusion spurred on by their love of Jesus, the empty tomb, and the tales of the women; but he would not fall for it. It simply couldn't be true. If he were to believe he would have to see for himself.

And so a week later, the Sunday after Easter, this Sunday, the disciples were again gathered together and Thomas with them this time, when Jesus again comes to them. The door is again shut, but still he miraculously comes in and stands in their midst declaring His peace to them. And then He does something even more extraordinary. He commands Thomas to handle Him and see that He is real.

“Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach you hand here, and put it into My side.” And he says to him: “Do not be unbelieving, but believing.” And at last Thomas too believes. His faith is restored. And He at once confesses it: “My Lord and my God!”

Of course it was important for Thomas to have seen Jesus alive for Himself, for Thomas, like the others, was to be an apostle. He was, as St. Mark tells us sent out with the Gospel when Jesus said: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.” He too was given the authority to wield the keys of heaven, forgiving and retaining sins by the Word of Gospel and by the Word of the Law respectively, as St. John tells us. And so Thomas needed to see Jesus alive, not just for himself it turns out, but for us, and for everyone who would hear the Gospel from him. He could not be a reliable witness of Jesus’ resurrection unless he had seen it with his own eyes. Acts teaches us that all of the apostles had to be eye-witnesses of Jesus ministry from the time of His baptism through the time of His ascension. They were the ones sent out with the message, with the authority to preach what they had seen. But how could they proclaim it if they had not themselves first seen and believed it.

And still Jesus says to Thomas: “Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” For the rest of the world would come to faith not through a direct encounter with the risen Christ, but through the preaching of His Word. And by that Word, to this very day, Christians are brought to faith in the crucified but now risen and ascended Jesus. St. John tells us that this is the reason for the Scriptures, which are the apostolic word in written form: “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” So for us faith does not come by seeing or by experiencing, or even by feeling, something about Jesus. It comes, as St. Paul says, from hearing the Word of God.

In the Introit we hear St. Peter’s words telling us that we should “desire the milk of God’s Word” just as babies desire the nourishment that their mother’s milk gives to them. If you’ve ever held a newborn that is hungry, you know how strong that desire can be. At first it nuzzles its head into your chest and gradually it begins to push its little head back and forth, searching, rooting, as it were, for the source of milk. And when it doesn’t find it, the baby get very upset. The infant is only satisfied when at last it is handed back to its mother and its need for food is at last satisfied. This is the kind of desire we are to have for the Word of God. It is faith’s only nourishment. And we should seek it diligently. And if we don’t get it, we should cry out for it until our need is at last satisfied.

And how should we receive that Word that we are to desire so greatly? Well, we are not react like those saints who first heard about the resurrection on Easter Day. When we hear the Word of God, we are to trust it. We are to believe it. Completely.

As I put together the bulletin for this week, I did a bit of digging through the rubrics for the rite of baptism. Eli’s baptism is the first adult baptism I’ve performed since the new hymnal came out, and while we don’t exactly follow the rite as its found in the new hymnal, I thought it would be helpful to see what reading they had chosen for the baptism of an adult. Luther’s rite, which we use, has only the reading from Mark that pertains to the faith of children. And so I thought surely the committee that put together the new baptismal liturgy for the new hymnal would have at least suggested some readings for use at an adult baptism. But when I read through the rubrics, I found that there was no

other reading suggested. The Mark reading was the only reading. And though I have taught this consistently throughout my years as a pastor, the reading didn't make sense until I read in the rubrics that the reason for this reason is that we must all become as little children to enter the kingdom of heaven, which is exactly what Jesus says here.

Now what does that mean? It means that not only must we desire God's Word in the same way that an infant desires milk, but we must also trust God's Word in the same way that an infant trusts its parents and looks to them for all good. Our trust in the Word of the Lord must be simple and complete. Faith, no matter how mature and well catechized it is, must at its heart be childlike, simply trusting in what God says.

Today you saw a man being baptized. You did not, however, see with your eyes the results of that baptism. And he did not see, or necessarily sense in any sort of tangible way, what was happening to him as water was poured over his head and the Words of Christ were proclaimed over him. And yet God tells us exactly what happened there. Here the dry bones of the old man were awakened by the proclamation and application of Christ's Word, and enlivened by His Holy Spirit and breath. There was a death and a resurrection. There was a crucifixion of what was old and sinful and a burial. But a new and holy man was brought forth alive, clothed with Christ, and connected to Christ, and filled with the Holy Spirit. Here an inward cleansing took place. Salvation was bestowed. Eli was born again by water and the Spirit.

And we know all of this because of the testimony of Christ concerning Holy Baptism and what it gives to us proclaimed in the apostolic Word. And now that baptism has taken place for Eli, and for all of us who have been baptized into Christ, the Spirit, the water and the blood bear witness to us of our place in Christ and in His heavenly kingdom. For, as St. John tells us: "And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one." At the crucifixion, water and blood poured out from Christ's wounded side. And the now in Holy Baptism we are washed in water with Christ's blood by the power of His Word and Spirit. And these three, Spirit, water and blood, say something to us, they tell us that because we have been thus washed, we are God's people whom He has forgiven for Christ's sake. Baptism is His witness on earth to us of this reality, a reality that we cannot fully see, fully comprehend, or fully experience in this world.

But here stands the Word of Christ, the witness of God, that we now are His own, that our lives are rooted, sealed, and lived "in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". And through the power of the Word active in Baptism as well as in scripture, preaching, catechesis, absolution and at last Holy Communion, we are given also to know Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whose name we now bear. But it is more than knowledge that is proclaimed to us. It is deeper than just that. Rather Christ proclaims to us the same thing that He said to the disciples that first Easter Day and again a week later. He proclaims: "Peace be with you." And He gives it through His Gospel.

But to keep this peace, to live in it, you must live in His Gospel. Having been baptized and made a children of God, each of us must live as children, desiring the pure milk of His Holy Word, and simply trusting in it. That's the only way that real peace in this earthly life is ever found or experienced.

The world would have us reject all of this as childish foolishness or as ignorant and unthinking superstition. The claims of Christianity, they say, are simply not reasonable. And I say, no they are not. But they are true and they are powerful unto salvation. For Christ who died for us, has risen. And St. Paul

tells us in I Corinthians: “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: and that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: after that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also...” It happened. There were plenty of witnesses who did see. And they have proclaimed this Gospel to us. And the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit have born witness through their preaching and baptizing. And if what Christ did is true, proving who He is and what He has accomplished for us, what He says is also certainly true. In His Word we find the pure milk we need. In His Word the heavenly is revealed and we find our place in the heavenly. In His Word and in His baptism we encounter Christ and find our peace. “Blessed [indeed] are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” Amen.

✧ Soli Deo gloria ✧