

EASTER II
Luth Church of the Master, Troy
4/17/77

"A TRIBUTE TO THOMAS"

Thomas said to them: 'If I don't see the scars of the nails in his hands, and put my finger on those scars, and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'
John 20:25

John's account of the experience of Thomas has usually been presented as the classic case of skepticism, and "doubting Thomas" has become a common, almost classic expression. God only knows, there is nothing more stiffeling than a classic skeptic. We've all known such people. Present even the most FOOL-PROOF plan, and somehow the true skeptic will doubt its feasibility.

And far too often, you know and I know why they have become classic skeptics... why they so regularly negate or seriously doubt a projected program. Too often it's simply because they don't want to get involved. They don't want to invest -- to make a personal commitment.

Just a few weeks ago I called on a family for the third time. Again the word was, "Well, Pastor, we just don't know -- we're really not sure." So I pressed a little harder and asked: "What's the matter - don't you think we offer the gospel at the Master?" And the response - "Oh no, we really like your people, and you and your preaching. (A LONG PAUSE) Well, to be honest, we're just afraid we'll have to get too involved."

Need I say more. Indecision and doubt -- all motivated by the same thing -- an unwillingness to get involved - to make a commitment -- to invest in the future of Christ's church.

And so we must be clear my Christian friends; Thomas the apostle in NO WAY can be seen as

this kind of classic doubter. We do him a t= great injustice when we identify him with the classic skeptics of our day. Thomas was not doubting the reality of the resurrection. Nor was he questioning it because he feared the commitment it would mean for him. He was in no way fearful of investing in the mission of the risen Christ.

But he was deeply fearful of investing in a mission of a masquerader.... someone who would pass himself off as the risen Lord. No doubt about it -- Thomas was not a dummy -- he would not be duped by a fake.

So it was that Thomas wanted more than claims about the risen Christ -- even if they came from his best friends. He wanted the prints and scars of the nails. Real identity was crucial for him. Some celestial phantom, different from the man of Calvary, simply would not do. A risen Lord without the marks of crucifixion would be like getting play money after a hard week of labor. *Thomas wanted no fake.*

Friends in Christ, we owe Thomas a great tribute. Because of his doubt for the real identity of Christ, we can NOW be certain that the risen Lord is no hoax-- no first century invention. Thomas' confession "My Lord and My God" was possible only because he was convinced that the Jesus of Calvary and the Christ of Easter were the same. He is our Lord and God ONLY because he still carries the evidence of the darkest marks of our disgrace.

But - unlike Thomas - we will never see the nail prints. But because of Thomas - we don't have to see them. We have seen them through Thomas. And now, "Happy are those who believe without seeing" means for us: Happy are those who see that the good news reveals a Jesus of the cross and Christ of the resurrection WHO ARE ONE AND THE SAME.

It is sad but often true today that many Christians have not integrated these two basics of faith. They see resurrection as if its graduation without any homework. Or conversely, all homework without any promise of graduation.

For instance, some people make our Christian faith out to be an ethic of the cross. They see faith only in its activist sense -- only as doing or serving others. Obviously - this is a result of faith -- b ut NOT THE ONLY ONE.

On the other hand - there are the advocates of popular Christianity in which everything is light and glory. This 700 Club variety of faith is often totally directed to another world. It's a Smile, Jesus Loves You and Has All the Answers kind of religion. Obviously, this can make our Lord and God into a fairy-God-mother type who floats around smiling down from heaven.

Thomas wanted a resurrected Lord in the world and he didn't want any pretty fictions with it. He wanted the SAME Lord who had triumphed over the bitter world -- and had the marks to show it.

And I hope that you and I -- had we been in Thomas' sandals -- I hope we wouldn't have settled for less. I hope we would have, and I hope we still do CONFESS A Lord and God who bears the life of sacrifice.

Because, you see, ^{that} relates to you and me. I'm sure that most of us WANT THE RISEN PART -- we want to be delivered on the last day -- we want our own resurrection. And, of course, God has promised that already through Christ.

But how about the prints and scars of sacrifice? Can we relate these to our own faith and lives? Do we want the glory without any offering of ourselves? Are we willing to give sacrificially KNOWING ALREADY that our future glory is pretty secure? How well have we integrated the Jesus of the cross and the Christ of Easter into our faith life?

Thomas was willing to give his all for the risen Lord and God who showed him the marks. We don't have to see the marks - we have the truth of Thomas' testimony. We know for a fact what our Lord and our God has done for us!

What prints and marks of gratitude will we have to show him when we come into our glory with him? Will our lives be a credit to his sacrifice? How will our life ledgers look when we meet our Lord and God?? How much time, energy, and treasure will we show invested in his kingdom -- and how much in the building of our own earthly kingdoms?

The way **OUR** ledger balances to a great degree tells us WHO IS OUR LORD AND OUR GOD. I doubt if there was any doubt who was Thomas' Lord and God for the rest of his life. How about you and me? Will our ledgers show more faith or more doubt than Thomas'?

Believe me, quite contrary to all this "doubting Thomas" talk - I don't have any doubts about Thomas. But in light of my first illustration today -- I do have serious doubts about people who say "My Lord and My God" and show no commitment other than words.

God help us to say "My Lord and My God" and respond with the marks of grateful sacrifice.

AMEN

Believe me, quite contrary to all this "doubting Thomas" talk I don't have any doubts about Thomas.

2nd Sunday of Easter
LUTH CHURCH OF THE MASTER, TROY
April 2, 1978

"YOUR ASSIGNMENT:"

"Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, even so I send you. . . . Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." John 20:21, 23

THE TRIUMPHANT TRUMPET IS SILENT THIS MORNING. I'VE SELECTED THE SAME TRIUMPHANT HYMNS, BUT THEY JUST DON'T SEEM TO HAVE THE SAME "ZEST" AS LAST WEEK. GONE TOO IS THE GREAT EASTER CROWD -- 317 WORSHIPPERS -- THE LARGEST IN THE HISTORY OF THIS CONGREGATION. OUR SCENE TODAY IS NOT UNLIKE THOSE FIRST DAYS AFTER THE RESURRECTION.

YOU'D THINK THAT, AFTER SOMETHING AS AWESOME AS THE RESURRECTION, JESUS WOULD HAVE RUN A CRUSADE FROM THE JERUSALEM COLLISEUM. WHAT A TREMENDOUS SHOW THAT WOULD HAVE MADE! I'M SURE THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN PACKED HOUSES BOTH DAY AND NIGHT. JESUS COULD HAVE BECOME FRIENDS WITH KINGS, EMPORERS, PRESIDENTS -- I'M SURE HE WOULD HAVE RECEIVED AN OPEN INVITATION TO THE WHITE HOUSE. BILLY GRAHAM'S CRUSADES WOULD HAVE LOOKED LIKE A SMALL-TIME OPERATION.

BUT JESUS DID NOT CHOSE THE DAZZLING DISPLAY OF MODERN DAY EVANGELISTS. HE DID NOT RENT A COLLISEUM - OR A PRIME-TIME SPOT ON TV. INSTEAD, HE MET QUIETLY WITH THE SAME ELEVEN DISCIPLES IN A CLOSED ROOM. THEY TALKED, ASKED QUESTIONS, ARGUED A LITTLE, AND THEN, JESUS GAVE THEM THEIR LIFE ASSIGNMENT.

IT WAS TIME TO COME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP OF EASTER FOR SOME DOWN-TO-EARTH INSTRUCTIONS. THE GLORY DAY WAS OVER -- IT WAS NOW TIME TO FACE THE GRUBBY DAY-BY-DAY WORLD. YOU SEE, JESUS WAS NOT SEEKING BIG CROWDS -- BECAUSE PEOPLE CANNOT BE DAZZLED INTO BELIEVING IN HIM. A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST CANNOT LEARN TO LIVE LIKE CHRIST BY MERELY WATCHING JESUS PUT ON A GOOD PERFORMANCE.

IT WAS THE WEEK AFTER EASTER. IT WAS TIME TO GET ON WITH THE REAL BUSINESS OF RESURRECTION. LIKEWISE, TODAY, ONE WEEK AFTER EASTER -- IT IS TIME TO DEAL WITH THE REAL BUSINESS OF THE RESURRECITON. WITHOUT ALL THE FANFARES AND THE DISTRACTIONS OF ONCE-A-YEAR CHRISTIANS, JESUS CALLS HIS POST-EASTER FOLLOWERS TOGETHER TO GIVE THEM THEIR LIVING INSTRUCTIONS:

HE SAYS, HERE'S YOUR ASSIGNMENT:

FIRST - I AM SENDING YOU OUT JUST AS THE FATHER SENT ME. So TAKE UPON YOURSELVES THE POWER OF MY WORD (called the Holy Spirit). AND WITH THIS POWER, FORGIVE PEOPLE WHO REPENT -- AND DON'T FORGIVE THE IMPENITENT.

THAT'S OUR ASSIGNMENT -- AS SIMPLE AND AS COMPLEX AS IT IS. I HAVE A HUNCH THAT THE 11 DISCIPLES WERE NOT TOO EXCITED TO GET THIS ASSIGNMENT FROM JESUS. AND THOMAS, BEING THE MOST RATIONAL AND MAYBE EVEN MOST SORROWFUL DISCIPLE, TOTALLY DISREGARDED THE ASSIGNMENT UNTIL HE HAD PROOF OF JESUS' IDENTITY.

THOMAS ALWAYS TAKES THE RAP - BUT HE'S SO MUCH LIKE

YOU AND ME. HE KNEW THAT JESUS' ASSIGNMENT WAS NOT THE LEAST BIT CONTRARY TO ANYTHING THAT JESUS HAD EVER SAID EARLIER. BUT VERY POSSIBLY, THOMAS WASN'T READY TO HIT THE DIRT TRAILS. SO HE WANTED AN ABSOLUTE GUARANTEE OF JESUS' IDENTITY BEFORE HE WAS GOING TO FOLLOW ORDERS.

ABSOLUTE
THEY WANT - GUARANTEE!

I'LL BET WE ALL KNOW PEOPLE LIKE THAT. PRESENT THEM WITH A CHRIST-LIKE ASSIGNMENT, AND THEN ALL OF A SUDDEN YOU GET ALL THESE QUESTIONS WHICH WILL STALL A DECISION. THE RATIONALIST WANTS AN ABSOLUTELY FOOL-PROOF SYSTEM BEFORE HE'S GOING TO TAKE A SINGLE STEP. AND THE FACTS ARE - THAT ALL THE RIGHT ANSWERS IN THE WORLD WILL RARELY SATISFY THAT KIND OF PERSON. SOME PEOPLE JUST WANT TO SIDE-STEP THE VERY SENSIBLE ASSIGNMENT THAT CHRIST HAS GIVEN US.

JESUS SAYS, AS THE FATHER SENT HIM, SO HE SENDS US. IN SIMPLE LANGUAGE, THAT MEANS WE ARE SENT FROM HERE TO TALK TO OTHERS ABOUT OUR BELIEF IN THE POWER THAT CHRIST GIVES US. I'VE SOMETIMES HEARD PEOPLE SAY THAT THEY CAN'T GO OUT AND TALK ABOUT THEIR FAITH WITH OTHER PEOPLE. BUT GIVE THOSE SAME PEOPLE A CHANCE TO GOSSIP OR RUN SOMEBODY DOWN, AND THEY HAVE NO TROUBLE AT ALL. ISN'T IT AMAZING -- WE HAVE NO TROUBLE CRUCIFYING LIFE, BUT WE CLAIM TO HAVE GREAT TROUBLE RESURRECTING LIFE -- THAT IS, TELLING OTHERS HOW THE LOVE OF CHRIST HAS HELPED US TO LIVE AND FORGIVE.

WELL, JESUS INSTRUCTS HIS DISCIPLES TO GO OUT AND TELL OTHERS WHAT THEY BELIEVE IN. THAT'S THE FIRST PART OF THE ASSIGNMENT -- THE EASY PART. AND THEN HE TELLS THEM -- NOW DON'T ONLY TALK ABOUT IT, BUT LIVE IT.

NAMELY, FORGIVE THOSE WHO REPENT; AND WHEN SOMEONE DOESN'T REPENT -- THEN THOSE SINS ARE RETAINED.

OBVIOUSLY, THAT'S THE PART OF THE GOSPEL THAT WE DON'T LIKE TO HEAR -- AND THAT'S ALSO THAT PART THAT'S SOMETIMES VERY HARD TO LIVE. WHY DO I SAY THIS? BECAUSE WE ALL KNOW THAT GOD IS A FORGIVING FATHER. AND NOW WE HEAR HIM THROUGH JESUS TO RETAIN SINS FOR THOSE WHO ARE IMPENITENT.

THE FACT IS - THAT GOD IS A FORGIVING GOD. HE ALWAYS FORGIVES THE PERSON WHO REPENTS -- THE PERSON WHO HAS AN CONTRITE HEART. BUT FOR THE PERSON WHO OPENLY RESISTS HIS LOVING FORGIVENESS -- WHO DENIES THIS POWER OF GOD -- WHO REFUSES TO ACKNOWLEDGE THIS POWER OF GOD THROUGH CHRIST -- THAT PERSON REMAINS IN A STATE OF SIN.

GOD HAS GIVEN US THE WILL TO ACCEPT OR TO REJECT HIS WORD, HIS FORGIVENESS. HE HAS NOT MADE US INTO PUPPETS -- WE HAVE BEEN GIVEN THE FREE WILL TO EITHER CHOOSE LIFE (MEANING FORGIVENESS) OR DEATH (MEANING SEPARATION FROM GOD'S PRESENCE). WHEN WE DEFY GOD'S FORGIVING LOVE, THEN WE HAVE MADE OUR CHOICE -- WE HAVE CHOSEN TO REMAIN IN SIN.

ALTHOUGH THESE ARE NOT PERFECT EXAMPLES -- JUST THINK ABOUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE ALCOHOLIC, OR THE COUPLE HAVING MARITAL PROBLEMS. NOT UNTIL THOSE PEOPLE ADMIT THAT THEY HAVE A PROBLEM IS THERE A CHANCE FOR RENEWAL. THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS -- THE POWER OF THE HOLY SPIRIT -- CAN ONLY BE EXPERIENCED WHEN WE SURRENDER TO IT.

JESUS TELLS HIS DISCIPLES TO RETAIN THE SINS OF THE IMPENITENT BECAUSE HE HOPES THAT THIS WILL LEAD THOSE PEOPLE TO FINALLY REPENT -- TO FINALLY SURRENDER AND ACCEPT HIS FORGIVENESS.

ON THE OTHER HAND, TO ANYONE WHO REPENTS, JESUS TELLS HIS DISCIPLES THERE'S ONLY ONE WORD: FORGIVENESS. THAT'S THE GOAL OF THE RESURRECTED CHRISTIAN LIFE -- TO BE PENITENT AND FORGIVING. TO BE PENITENT WHEN WE HAVE HURT OTHERS; TO BE FORGIVING WHEN OTHERS HAVE HURT US.

YOU AND I HAVE RECEIVED OUR ASSIGNMENT. IT WILL BE OUR DUTY AND OUR DELIGHT TO SHARE THIS ASSIGNMENT UNTIL NEXT EASTER - AND TIL THE END OF TIME.

AMEN

Jesus does not urge us to retain sins in order to damn a person - but rather in order to cause that person to repent

EASTER II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 18, 1982

"PEACE BE WITH YOU!"

"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And he breathed on them, and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained!'"
John 20:21-23

The triumphant trumpets and trombones are silent this morning. Only a dying organ leads our singing of the victorious Easter hymns today. And we've also lost the vocal power of that multitude of 800 worshippers who were with us last week. Today - it's back to belief as usual. Much like a week after the resurrection, only the loyal remnant of disciples have gathered to be with their Lord.

You'd think with something as awesome as the resurrection that Jesus would have run a big crusade from the Jerusalem Colliseum. Just imagine what a tremendous show that would have made -- "He who was once dead, is now alive and in person." Can't you just imagine all the fun that the public relations people would have had with that. Jesus would have been playing to packed houses ... Billy Graham's crusades would have looked liked small-time.

But Jesus did not choose the dazzling display of modern day evangelists for his resurrection appearances. Instead he met quietly with his original disciples behind closed doors. They talked, asked questions, and even argued a little. But most important in that meeting -- Jesus gave them an assignment ... a mission for the days ahead.

It was time to come down from the mountaintop of Easter for some down-to-earth ministry. It was time to move from the empty tomb to the crowded, chaotic streets of the world. It was time for the disciples to realize that the resurrection was not merely a divine performance to be watched ... it was a power to be lived!

Jesus comes to us today in the same way. It is one week after Easter; it's now time to get on with the real business of the resurrection. Without all the fanfares and the distractions of once-a-year Christians -- Jesus calls upon

authentic followers to overcome the world with their faith. He offers us an assignment -- a mission in the world: It is the mission of PEACE ... of sending us into the world with the power of his breath ... namely, the power of his peace, which is the forgiveness of sins.

The mission of Jesus' true disciples is not to sit around and talk about the resurrection ... Nor is it our mission to idly chatter about or pray for peace. God has known far too many followers who never put his power and peace into action.

Far too many Christians are like the Princeton seminarians who left their ethics seminar for a peace rally. The psychology department of Princeton had intentionally hired an actress to stand along the route that the students would take. She was instructed to choke uncontrollably, gasping for breath.

The future ministers hurried by her as she leaned helplessly against the wall of a building in plain site. Some of them glanced uneasily at her, but not one stopped to help her. At one point she even fell to one knee for greater effect. But no one stopped.

Later when the students learned of the experiment, many of them gave the peace rally as an excuse for not stopping. Each one said that he felt someone else was better equipped to help the woman.

Please don't mistake my point. I'm not opposed to peace rallies. In fact, true Christians will find themselves involved in serious discussions of peace and nuclear war in the coming weeks. If you've read the Lutheran, you've already seen that the nuclear freeze will be a major issue of our synod conventions this year.

The church has an absolute mandate to be involved in these discussions. Peace and nuclear war are hardly political issues -- they are some of the deepest moral and spiritual issues facing the church today. And we dare not leave these matters in the spiritually empty hands and minds of our politicians -- whether they be in Columbus or Washington. Never before has the church had a clearer mandate to study the complexities of this issue.

But like the Princeton seminarians -- we dare not study and in the process overlook those already in pain and need of peace. The peace that Jesus gives is an active peace -- it is not merely a subject to be discussed and praised at rallies. Jesus said, "Peace be with you," and immediately he said, "I send you to help those who are choking from sin, or greed, or guilt, or whatever other cause in the world."

The "Peace of God" is always one which seeks to alleviate pain and guilt. We need only look at the disciples themselves. As they gathered behind closed doors, they were feeling deep pain and guilt. They had been deserters -- cowards in the face of the crucifixion. They were feeling the pain of Jesus' loss; they were undoubtedly humiliated by the thoughts of Calvary. They were guilt-ridden by their unfaithfulness to Jesus in his greatest hour of need.

And what was Jesus first expression to them: "Peace be with you." For a first century Jew, to say "Peace be with you" means "I forgive you everything!" There was no condemnation from Jesus which might have been my or your natural response if we had been deserted. Jesus offers peace to his unfaithful followers.

Who then could be better equipped to be the missionaries of that peace? Is it any wonder that he says: And now I send you to offer what you first have received!?!

The same holds true for you and me. We are the ones who have gathered after the hoopla of seeing the empty tomb. We are the ones to whom Jesus says: "Peace be with you." And now I send you to deliver the world from its guilt and pain. Offer my peace to those who will accept it.

But this peace of God is not only a warm fuzzy -- it is also a victorious cry. When Christ says, "Peace be with you" he is assuring us that death and chaos will never have the final victory.

As we baptize infants like Crystal today -- we offer the "Peace of the Lord." That's not just a folksy religious saying! It is the very breath of Christ -- we are assuring Crystal that Christ has already given her the victory over

death; her life will not end in chaos, but in the loving arms of God her Father.]

The "Peace of God" brings his dimension of order and ultimate security into our lives. We no longer live merely to exist or to accumulate things -- we now live to bring God's security (peace) into the lives of everyone around us. We live to bring God, creation, and one another into their proper order & harmony.

"Peace be with you" -- these are not merely soft, soothing words of comfort. They are radical words of discipleship; people who share the "peace of the Lord" are saying that they are committed to bringing God's order and harmony into this world. And they will not be satisfied until God's Spirit reigns as the supreme power over all creation.

Jesus' admonition, "Peace be with you," makes crystal clear that the talk of peace and nuclear war is by no means limited to the political arena. It is the work of every true disciple. Some of those disciples today think that the United States and Russia should mutually legislate a nuclear weapons freeze. Other disciples criticize this as being "naive." But of course EQUALLY NAIVE is the official political position which talks about a "limited nuclear war." Both a freeze and limited nuclear war suffer from a naive understanding of human nature.

As faithful disciples God calls us to overcome the naive notions of the world. Never before has the people of God had a greater calling in this world. "Peace be with you" means that genuine followers of Jesus do not skirt the issue of nuclear war or any other life-threatening matter. The disciples of Christ once deserted him at Calvary; his disciples today cannot afford to run out on him. "Peace be with you" is our mandate to study, to work, and to sweat for his "peace" if we hope to save rather than condemn the world.

And as we go about our task of peacemaking, God gives us the perfect tool to do our work: THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS. God knows that to be human is to be arrogant, to be greedy, to be unfaithful, to be destructive, to be belligerent. That's just the way we are -- especially when we're tackling the significant issues of the day.

Thus he offers his power of forgiveness to us. And then he sends us to each other -- telling us to forgive one another for of such is his Kingdom, the principality of peace. And as we go about our peacemaking, he says now and then you will find someone who will not repent ... someone who will not be sorry for his/her sins of destructiveness. In those cases, Jesus says: **RETAIN THEIR SINS UNTIL THEY REPENT:** for only through true repentance can my **PEACE BE WITH YOU.**

Easter Sunday has come and gone. The superficial "Alleluias" have been sung with great fanfare! But the real mission of Christ's resurrected presence and peace is not only shared on one Sunday. Christ lives and mandates his peace 52 weeks, 365 days a year.

As we have first received the power of his peace ... as we have been delivered from the pain and guilt and destructiveness of life and death -- so now we are sent into the world to make life less painful, less guilt-ridden, less destructive, and **MORE PEACE-FILLED.**

AMEN

EASTER II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 10, 1983
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"POST-EASTER PROOFS!"

And Jesus said to them: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. And he breathed on them and said, Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." And he said to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

John 20:2-23;29

The brass has had its final blast for the Easter season. It's back to religion as routine this week. The faithful that raised the strain last Sunday has suddenly dwindled and dispersed. We are obliged to ask: What happened to the Easter parade?? Today it would hardly seem evident that there was a big hoopla last week. Today we're hard-pressed to see the proof of the resurrection; it's an appropriate day for Thomas to appear in the gospel. Because like him, we have to ask ourselves: where is the risen Christ?? What happened to all those faithful resurrection worshippers?? Is this Christ alive -- or is his resurrection appearance just a recorded even of history -- having no relevance for today??

These questions are vitally important: Is the resurrection just an historical portrait of the past; or is it a commanding power of the day?? Those important questions remind me of the story of the pastor who returned to his former parish for an anniversary celebration. He had been remembered fondly for his children's messages. But in the eight years since he had left, all the children who once had paraded to the front were now too old.

But he proceeded anyway with a whole new batch of children. Thinking it was safe to questions these children about his reappearance as pastor, he bold asked: "How many of you have ever seen me before?!" There was a long pause with no response -- except that a little girl's hand in the back row began to rise. So he thought he'd take advantage of her interest and ask again: Have any of you ever seen me before?!"

This time the little 5-year old girl's hand popped right up. And he asked: "Have you really seen me?" And She responded: "Oh, yes ... I've seen you many, many times before!!" The pastor was a bit dumbfounded! He had never seen this little girl before -- and he wasn't quite sure why she was so convinced that she knew him. He had not been back to this parish for eight years ... and she was only five -- there was just no way that she could know him.

He finally said: "Little girl, you must have me confused with someone else ... maybe you think that I'm Jesus or one of the other disciples???"

She perked right up -- with that great 5-yr old glow: "OH NO! You're not Jesus! I know who you are!! I've seen you lots and lots of times. You're the same pastor that I've seen all those times before!"

The confidence of this little girl was just too much! The pastor knew by this time that he had created great curiosity in the congregation -- and of course, he was equally curious! He would just have to find out what she was thinking... and so he said: "Well, honey, I don't remember seeing you before, and I really don't think that you've seen me -- but if you insist, then why don't you tell all of us where you've seen me before so many times?!!?"

"O.K." The little girl got up and came over to the pastor and took the microphone and then said: "I've seen you many, many times in my mommies' bedroom!"

There was a moment of stone silence! Then there was the typical titter of congregational laughter mixed with embarrassment -- the pastor just stood there stunned -- and not very amused at all by his circumstances. This was not exactly the kind of reappearance he had planned on for this anniversary celebration. As he was about to have the little girl sit down -- he noticed her name tag. All of a sudden -- it came to him: he had officiated for the wedding of the little girl's parents 10-years ago. And sure enough-- in her parent's bedroom was a wedding picture with the same pastor beaming with joy.

Aside from the humor of the story -- it has great impact for today's gospel. The only poof the little girl had of

knowing this pastor was strictly an HISTORICAL PROOF....
the proof of an old picture. Her relationship to the pastor
was merely through an old photograph -- there was nothing
personal -- nothing living -- nothing dynamic -- and
surely nothing off color! It was strictly a pastohistorical
print with no power for the present!

Regretably -- that's the same picture of proof that many
Christians have for the risen Christ! Nothing personal!!
Nothing current! Nothing really living or dynamic! For them,
the resurrection of Jesus Christ means little more than a
by-gone historical reality! These Christians come out once-a-
year to remember a picture of an empty tomb! But the empty
tomb is just that -- it has no impact upon their present
lives. They see nothing more than a historical picture!

Jesus said to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not
seen, and yet believe!" Blessed are those who get beyond the
mere photogtaphic reprints of life! Blessed are those who get
beyond historical pictures of the past!! Blessed are those
who get beyond nail holes .. and the pierced side... and all
the other physical signs of reality!! Blessed are those who
have received the BREATH -- the Spirit -- of Christ!!

Certainly it's important for us to affirm the 1st century
pictures and witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. Without them --
we would not have verifiable proof for today! Just like the
photographs of earlier celebrations of our lives -- we need
those historical prints -- those earlier sketches of reality!!
There is no doubt about it -- we need Thomas' testimony in the
upper room. It gives validity and authenticity to Chrïst's
resurrection! But that 1st century picture IS NOT THE ONE AND
ONLY PROOF FOR THE RESURRECTION TODAY!!

Môre than historical reprints are needed today ... more
than photographic images of the past are essential for the
vitality of today's believers. God's plan was never to verify
the resurrection through one recorded event -- and then just
leave it there!! He recognized that there would be agnostics
and atheists in every âge -- and the proof for these is not
an historical reprint -- but a spiritual power that pervades
life on earth!!

The gospel reports that "Jesus breathed on the disciples."
Respiration -- it is the very power of life. Just as the God

of Genesis breathed life into clay -- so the risen Christ launches his new creation by breathing his power into his followers. The power of the resurrection is not some kind of historical portrait of the past -- it is the forgiving and uplifting power of Christ being shared in the present!!

The post-Easter proofs of the resurrection are not some kind of philosophical ideas or concepts to be debated by intellectuals. God has more urgent business for the risen Christ and his followers! The post-Easter proofs of the risen Christ are those contemporary places where there is hunger -- and in the name of the risen Christ, Christian relief is being given.

The post-Easter proofs are in relationships where there has been guilt and now there is the forgiveness of Christ! The post-Easter proofs are those places where there has been suffering and fear -- and somebody cared enough to be there just to listen and show compassion -- to offer the "peace of the risen Christ!"

Yes - right at this very moment - the post-Easter proof of the risen Christ is where there are 30,000 homeless in New Orleans and the flooded south.... and where Christians are raising the strain of compassion and mercy for these post-Easter victims. Your regular benevolence dollars has already brought the Luth Church In America to help -- through Domestic Emergency Relief and the Luth World Relief. Of course -- all you have to do is put your offering in a pew envelope - mark it Domestic Relief -- and it will be on its way tomorrow!

Yes - the post-Easter proofs of the resurrection are also right here at Hoper Lutheran .. where the Sacrament of Holy Baptism is being offered to Billy Feldhaus -- that's the breath of the risen Christ!! ...where the body and blood of Christ is regularly being offered for the forgiveness of sins -- that's the breath of the risen Christ! ... where the Word is being preached and taught to enhance a living relationship with Christ and his community -- that's the breath of the risen Christ!!

The proof of the resurrection is not only seen in photographic images of the past! These reprints are part of the Easter story! But the really important picture for this community of faith ... and many more today - is that "Peace" and "Forgiveness" is being offered in the name and thru the breath of Christ thru his contemporary servants. And that's what the resurrection is all about!!

AMEN

EASTER II

Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo

April 2, 1989

Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"POWER TO THE PEOPLE!"

"Go and stand in the temple and speak to the people all the words of life." ... "Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people." Acts 5:20;26

Over the near 20 years of my pastoral ministry, I have probably preached more than 300 funeral sermons. But in all those funerals, I cannot say that I have ever officiated for a "St. Peter," a "St. Paul," or a "Mary Magdalene," or even a "St Thomas." In fact, in many of those funerals I have actually said the following words: "he/she was not seen as a great saint of civilization ... he did not establish any great religious monuments ... she did not set into motion any great religious revivals or revolutions ... but he did dedicate himself to God's power ... he made this a better world!!

Today's sermon is dedicated to the millions and millions of POWERFUL PEOPLE like that -- not the St. Peters or St. Pauls or even indubitable doubters like Thomas. There can be no doubt about the facts -- the church needs dynamic leaders who inspire and stimulate and champion God's great causes. But the real power of God is reflected today in an almost obscure passage from the book of Acts: "Then the captain with the officers went and brought them, but without violence, for they were afraid of being stoned by the people."

The Sanhedrin officers were not afraid of the great saints of faith. They were not intimidated by Peter and his dynamic message or miraculous deeds. They were not fearful of the Messiah or the rumor of his resurrection. But they had a deep concern about the people in the streets and synagogues: THE PEOPLE WHO WERE LISTENING TO THIS "GOOD NEWS" AND BELIEVING IT! And even more scary, the numbers of believers were growing by leaps and bounds every day!

Many of us who lived through the 60's know very personally the fears of the Sanhedrin. In 1967, Stokely Carmichael wrote, Black Power; in 1968, Eldridge Cleaver authored Soul on Ice. Like St. Peter, these men were major leaders of a racial revolution. But few of us were really intimidated by their reformation resolve or rhetoric. However, it was not too long after publication that all of black America was listening to them ... and even more alarming, blacks began believing in radical, social reformation. POWER TO THE PEOPLE soon became the cry of the disenfranchised and dispossessed. The raised fist was seen on street corners, at mass rallies and marches, in confrontations with police, and even from olympic medalists. It wasn't too long before white and black America were at least figuratively at each other's throats.

How interesting that a racial reformation in the 1960's was just a repetition of a 1st century resurrection revolution. Both reformations taught us that we dare not become too fascinated with the giants of any movement ... for the real power was WITH THE PEOPLE. God's resurrection power is never enshrined in glass cathedrals or propagated through well-groomed pulpit orators. God's resurrection power is in the priesthood of all believers - the often unknown, unnamed, common, ordinary, spirit-filled people, like you and sometimes me.

You see - the world is not impressed by my pulpit preaching. That's my job -- I'm supposed to be inspiration in tone and syntax. People rarely remain dedicated to a church just because it has good preachers. But the people of the world are moved and energized by what they see and hear from you: the world waits and watches to see if the heart that beats beneath your skin and within your body is truly the heart and spirit of Christ. That's why we have been so moved and energized by Hope's chancel choir in the last few months. Not only because of Janet Bristol's inspirational leadership - but because of the tremendous response from ordinary voices. Just ordinary people -- no opera greats, no prime time personalities, just ordinary voices dedicated and empowered to create harmonies for God and his people.

Yes, today's sermon is dedicated to the real resurrection power of Christ - THE POWER OF GOD'S ORDINARY PEOPLE! Today's word is not for the NCAA champs, not for the oscar winners, not for all the other limelight personalities who get all the press. Today's text, like every week, is for the masses and multitudes who line up week after week alone the sidelines of the sanctuary ... seeking to be fed in order that they might feed others. Today's "good news" is for the sometimes hesitant and timid ... those often classified as spiritual spectators ... the masses of religious reluctants or dedicated doubters. It is for that great multitude of Christians who simply feel they can't do anything miraculous or spectacular for their Lord.

So they ask: what can I do as an ordinary Easter person? "I go to the office ... I do my job faithfully ... I clean the house ... I cook the meals ... I raise the children ... I pay my taxes ... I try to live a decent, useful life -- now how can I be A MORE PRODUCTIVE POWER OF CHRIST? Please understand me: I don't like speaking at public forums ... I'd much rather pray in private ... I'm just not a spotlight Christian ... so keep all the attention off me or I'll find the nearest exit and hide."

Well, today's text speaks most affirmatively to everyone who wants to be a BELIEVABLE PERSON OF GOD ... BUT IS SOMETIMES INSECURE AND AFRAID. The first and most vital

message for anyone waiting to be empowered by God is: DO NOT HIDE! There is no such thing as an unimportant person or unimportant task in God's eyes. So often people say, "Well, I can't do anything spectacular or outstanding at church, so I might as well do nothing." That's not God's spirit speaking! God always says: DO SOMETHING ... ANYTHING ... BUT DO SOMETHING!

We all know that too often we think our efforts will only be a "drop in the bucket." Well, the Martyns have a leaky faucet in the basement at 2304 Barrington. Every day for too many days now, I have placed a bucket in the basement sink. And every single day ... every day that bucket is filled to the brim. God loves DROPS IN THE BUCKET.

Millions and millions of God's people have been eulogized as "drops in the bucket." They weren't St. Peters or St Pauls -- but neither did they hide! THEY DID SOMETHING TO MAKE THIS WORLD, THIS COMMUNITY, THIS CHURCH A BETTER PLACE. And that's God's POWER TO HIS PEOPLE! That's the spirit which makes this church a better place than any other place in the world. God's word today is: DO SOMETHING TO MAKE THIS WORLD A BETTER PLACE! (BE HIS POWER TO THE PEOPLE!)

Make it a better place for the hungry, for the lonely, for the sick, for the guilt-ridden, for the bereaved, for the poor, for the aged, for the infant, for the handicapped, for the fearful, for the home-bound, for the uneducated, for the war-torn, for the dying, for the imprisoned! THERE'S A PLACE FOR EVERYONE TO DO SOMETHING IN THE BODY OF CHRIST ... SO DO SOMETHING. Seek ... and you shall find ... the resurrection power of God.

And a second practical guideline for empowered God's people is simply: don't ever believe that shining security and pompous greatness is always the only way, only truth or the only life among God's people. We call Thomas the doubter - the one who needed to see before he believed. Doubt and insecurity can be one of God's greatest motivators for building a better world. (Just in recent weeks - we at Hope have seen how the doubt of just two of God's people has led to an improved and more refined building expansion plan.) Yes, doubt and insecurity can sometimes lead to great improvements -- making the world and the church better than it was before!

Let me illustrate with our favorite people - our children. If a child knows that his father or mother will always be there to solve his problems and dilemmas, to resolve his crises, to comfort his sorrows, to pay for his every need and desire -- THAT CHILD BECOMES AN EMOTIONAL, PSYCHOLOGICAL, AND CULTURAL CRIPPLE. Insecurity is often AN ESSENTIAL FIRST STEP to emotional, spiritual and social growth.

Every one of us has had a time in his/her life when we have said, "I just can't do it." I certainly remember the first time I was asked me to preach. "I JUST CAN'T DO IT," was my response. But thankfully, someone was there who said, "Yes you can!" That's the power of the resurrected Christ. Christ always says, "Yes you can!" God always urges us -- TO GIVE IT A TRY, for failure with God is always forgiven. God's way, God's truth, God's life (POWER) IS TO TURN OUR INSECURITY INTO PERSONAL GROWTH FOR OURSELVES AND OTHERS. (That's why Dr. Mark Powell said a few weeks ago that Christian Education is just as important for adults as Christian worship.)

That's the joy of being a member of the body of Christ -- it means we are living and learning amidst a people who are always saying "Yes, you can!" In fact, that's the very purpose of God's body, the church ... always to enable us to believe, "Yes, We can!" That's God's Way, God's truth, and God's life -- that "yes, using his power, his people can build a better world."

Richard Carl Hoefler, my favorite homilist, gives it another twist in one of his analogies. He says that there are basically two ways people look at the gift of creation -- as a grand piano or a pile of junk. He says many people just see life as wires and pegs, as white keys and black keys ... as some wood over here, some metal over there ... all thrown into a heap ... a pile of junk. But he goes on: if you have a piano builder with a set of plans, that person can take that pile of junk and arrange its pieces into a grand piano. The Bible tells us that God took a pile of cosmic junk (of nothingness) and fashioned it into a grand piano.

Then if you add a composer, who writes a composition of mercy with the ink of his own blood -- you bring the sounds of sinful humanity into a harmony of a loving and forgiving God. Then you finally add a musician, the power or Spirit of the one who plays -- and then you add a variety of violins and drums and horns and reeds -- and you no longer have a silent pile of junk, but a glorious symphony of love.

That is God's story of ordinary people like you and me. He takes simple, ordinary things -- a string, a peg, a white key, a black key -- all these are part of his grand plan to produce his power of love in the world. As long as each of us DOES SOMETHING with our piece -- we are an important part of the total symphony.

God has created each of us to be an important part in his grand piano of life. We may not be the soundboard of St. Peter ... we may not be the reverberating foot pedal of St. Paul ... but we have all been built and empowered by the same God ... to play our special part in HIS symphony of love TO MAKE THIS A BETTER WORLD. Today, God says to Thomas and each of us: "Yes you can ... even if you're only a single string, one little key, or a drop in the bucket -- YES, YOU CAN! SUCH IS GOD'S POWER TO HIS PEOPLE! BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HAVE NOT YET SEEN, BUT STILL BELIEVE ... BY DOING SOMETHING!

AMEN.

EASTER II
Hope Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 23, 1995
Peter R. Martyn, Pastor

"THE CREDENTIALS THAT DEFEAT DOUBT!"

When it was evening that first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he showed them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoiced and Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ... But Thomas said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails and put my finger in that mark and hand in his side, I will not believe!" ... A week later, they were in the house again with Thomas. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." And he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands; reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." And Thomas answered, "My Lord and My God!" John 20:19-20; 23-26

The triumphant trumpets, trombones & tympani are silent this morning. We've lost the vocal power of more than 650 Easter voices. The radiant light of Easter's empty tomb has turned to a sun-lit but dreary, half-filled sanctuary in Toledo. Using last week's image of being "Home Safe," it's pretty obvious that Easter Sunday was not a **home run** -- at least not for more than 50% of the worshippers who did not show up again.

But not much has changed from that first week after Easter. The disciples were gathered in a room with the doors shut. They were afraid for themselves. Just like many Christians today, they were not singing with gusto, "Christ is Risen, Allelulia!" **After all, their teacher and Lord had been executed; he had been ripped away from them by a cross; it is not only fearful when one's leader leaves, but they wondered who would be the next to die?** So like any fearful group, whether in Jerusalem or Oklahoma City, they gathered together in mutual support and shared terror. They cried & comforted each other. They said to each other over and over again, **"I just can't believe that this terrible thing has happened here in this holy place"** ... or here in this safe mid-western countryside. Yes, whether the crucifixion of Jesus Christ or the horrendous destruction of a federal bldg in Oklahoma City, the mood following such acts of evil and terror is always one of fear, doubt, and total confusion. We just can't believe that such things can happen in a civilized society!

And it's precisely in the midst of that fear, doubt, terror and isolation that Jesus Christ came and stood among them. And first he said, "Look at my hands and my side." And then to their further confusion he said, "Peace be with you." First, he showed them **THE CREDENTIALS THAT ALWAYS DEFEAT DOUBT & FEAR: the wounds in his hands and side.** Then he asked them to be empowered by his peace. And we must remember here that Jesus' understanding of "peace" is not the absence of war or terrorism. Jesus "Peace" is a dynamic gift of courage & wholeness -- **a commission for his people to get beyond the carnage of crucifixion and move toward working for restored wholeness!** Peace is a willingness to sacrifice for the restoration of healing & wholeness.

"Peace" is what happens when the doctor comes into your room or mine and says, "I am doing everything in my power to get you going again." He/she

isn't waving a magic wand saying that everything will immediately be whole, but that's the direction that things are now going! Thus, "Peace" is not the absence of disease or pain, but "peace" is knowing that everything is being done to overcome the terror, fear and doubts of suffering and pain! So, when Jesus showed both the disciples and Thomas the wounds in his hands and side -- **those were the credentials that assured the disciples that God was truly overcoming the terror and death of Good Friday!** The risen body of Christ was not sufficient. He had to show the marks of sacrifice to convince his followers that their doubts and fears were no longer necessary!! God had triumphed over pain & death!

Is this any different from what we have witnessed for the last several days? Much like the crucifixion of Jesus, all we can say about this bombing is that it represents the very worst sinfulness and derangement of humanity in our culture! **But we can't change that evil and sinfulness! It has been with us from the beginning of time!** This terror and chaos only confirms what we confess every week--which secularists in our society agnostically deny: *"that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves ... that we sin against God and one another in thought, word and deed ... by what we have done and by what we have left undone!"* How can our atheistic society look at the carnage of Oklahoma City and not see the truth of this Christian confession and conviction?!?

But our faith does not end with the cross on Calvary or the rubble of a federal building. Jesus came among the fearful in that room to show that the marks of crucifixion and terror had been overcome!! Likewise, thousands went to Oklahoma City this week to show their own marks & wounds of sacrifice to reveal that the **peace of God was still in the midst of Oklahoma City -- to transform tragedy and doubt into restored wholeness and healing.** Like all responses to brutal crucifixions, this whole nation has gathered with the people of Oklahoma City to reassure them that they are not alone and without help! This whole nation has done what Jesus did for his disciples in that room: "he came among them, showed his wounds of sacrifice and then said, "Peace be with you." Thousands have done the same for the terrorized in Oklahoma City! **The Spirit of Christ has risen again to overcome terror!!**

The Credentials That Defeat Doubt are always the wounds of sacrifice. When we see a people or leader who is willing to be wounded for the good of a community or nation, then we can be confident & of good courage. Then our fears and doubts can be overcome. Sixteen years ago on this same day in this same sanctuary there were doubts and fear about the future of Hope Church -- esp. with a 37-yr-old new leader in the pulpit that day. It was the day of his trial sermon at Hope. He was nervous and fearful (although he covered it with a smile); and so were the people of Hope nervous & fearful. And the facts are -- **no one's fears and doubts were overcome that day by my sermon. Words alone are not the credentials that defeat doubt & fear!** But I hope that the sixteen years of sacrificial commitment that have followed those words have helped to transform some of the fears and doubts of that chaotic time. Because, today I stand here showing many more wounds of servanthood than I did 16 years ago in this pulpit. In fact, a wedding photographer who shot a wedding here nine years ago recently was shooting another one & said to me: "Wow, Pastor Martyn!

Have you ever aged since 1986!!" Nothing like being told that the marks of sacrifice are showing!

But my credentials are miniscule compared to the great saints who have helped us defeat our doubts and fears. Names like ***Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Calvin and Charles Wesley*** to name a few. **Or that homely teen-age girl in Romania who entered a convent to become a nun.** When she completed her training, she believed she was called by God to one of the most dangerous black holes on earth, Calcutta, India. Vicious criminals, dead beats, the sick and disabled, the homeless, the poor and the starving -- that's all that existed in this hell hole. But this nun and her helpers transformed that black hole; they fed them and brought the healing love of Christ to all of them. You know this nun as ***Mother Teresa.*** And although she may not have nail holes in her hands and side, she has many other marks of sacrifice that convince the world that Christ is risen. Like Christ, in the presence of Mother Teresa, there is nothing to doubt or fear. Even death is O.K. with Mother Teresa!

In 1939 at Union Seminary in NY, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to America as a guest lecturer. He had opposed Hitler since the early 30's. He belonged to a group of men (some who were German military officers) who sought to bomb Hitler's command room with the intent of killing him. A heavy table, however, absorbed the explosion and Hitler was unharmed. Bonhoeffer told the American students these stories and others to convince them of his willingness to suffer for God's "peace" in Germany. They asked Bonhoeffer to remain!

But he was haunted by Hitler's slaughter and the corruption of the church and clergy in Germany. So he returned, only to be picked up by the secret police and imprisoned with American pilots and British flyers. When the police came to hang Bonhoeffer, he turned to his flying friends, raised his fingers in a victory sign, and said: *"Today, the resurrection!"* He suffered the marks of a hangman's noose - but those rope marks were his credentials of defeating doubt and fear!

So there you have it! The Credentials That Defeat Doubt & Fear are not pious platitudes uttered by pastors or parishoners. Like our Lord, only the marks of sacrifice reveal that **faith is not merely talking the talk, but walking the walk!** That is particularly true for our culture today. Because recent research shows that many Christians are even lying when they talk the talk. Gallup poles have asked: "In the last week, did you attend church?" Year after year, about 40% of the people said "Certainly; Yes" to this question.

But recently, people have looked around on Sunday mornings and not seen 40% of the faithful. So in 1993, researchers selected a county in Ohio which had shown itself as typical America. On Sunday morning, the researchers spread out to all churches across the county and actually tabulated the results. Across the board, only 20% of the people were in church. As Larry said recently, America is not only less than majority Christian -- it is under 20% committed Christian! Obviously, the research confirmed that many Christians had been lying to the Gallup poles. And we wonder why there is fear and doubt in this land ... many don't even tell the truth nor seek the truth when it comes to their faith! And they certainly aren't willing to sacrifice for Christ if they're not even willing to worship Christ!!

Thomas reminds us today that we need a faith which is willing to live by the marks of true Christianity -- **not a faith which talks the talk but fails to walk the walk.** On a Saturday evening, Dick Gregory recently performed in a Chicago nightclub. The next morning he decided to worship in a great gothic downtown Chicago church. As he was about to step into the church, a white usher told him: "**This church is for whites only.**" Gregory walked across the street to a tavern. All the white patrons there gladly welcomed him and carried on with him as a regular guy. Impressed by the difference, he said: "***The Cross of Christ is on the wrong building here in Chicago!***"

The cross is the greatest Christian symbol to show that faith in a risen Christ defeats doubt and fear! The cross was the instrument that caused the marks of sacrifice to Jesus' hands and side ... and these marks were his CREDENTIALS OF BEING THE RISEN CHRIST! These marks gave hope and overcame doubt for those early disciples. **They are still the marks that give hope and overcome doubt in a sinful world, just as we have seen by the rescuers and Red Cross in Oklahoma City!** We who wear his cross are called by him **to live authentically by the symbol we often hang around our necks.** And that means a lot more than talking the talk on Easter Sunday; it means walking the walk of sacrifice 365 days a year! So, let us always wear this mark of sacrifice proudly -- but even more, **faithfully!!**

AMEN.

EASTER II
Glenwood Lutheran Church, Toledo
April 6, 1997
Peter R. Martyn, Interim Pastor

“Post-Easter ‘PROOFS!’”

Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” ... And he said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” John 20:21-23;29

One week after Easter Sunday and it's back to religion as normal! The 425 faithful who raised the strain last Sunday has now dwindled & dispersed. So we ask today, “What happened to our Easter parade?” The Sunday after Easter is always a hard day to show the real PROOF of the RESURRECTION! This has traditionally been called “low Sunday” -- a day without brass, without bunnies, without breakfasts and often without a bouyant spirit. Is it any wonder that Thomas should appear on this day?!? Because like Thomas, the faithful are asking today: “Where is this risen Christ we heard about last week? Where are all the faithful who testified to his power over death?? Show me the nail prints ... the pierced side! Is this Christ really alive -- or was his resurrection just a fact of ancient history with no relevance for anyone today??”

Please don't think I'm making light of these questions. Nothing is more vital on this day than taking seriously Thomas' attitude of questioning: “Is the resurrection only an historical portrait of the past? Or does it have a commanding power for your life and my life every day??” Those questions need to be asked! And they remind me of a pastor who returned for a former parish's anniversary celebration. He was remembered fondly for his children's messages. But in the decade since he had left -- all the children who once paraded to the front were grown up; so there was a whole new batch of children.

Thinking it was safe to question these children about his re-appearance, he boldly asked: “Have any of you ever seen me before?!?” After a brief pause, one little 5-yr-old raised her hand in the back row as if to say “Yes.” He couldn't fathom that she really knew him, so he said: “Well, one little girl says she knows me, but I think she has me mixed up with Jesus or one of the other disciples.” At that point she popped up and said, “Oh no, I've seen you hundreds of times before today!” He hadn't been back to this parish for ten years; there was no way that she could have ever seen him.

He finally said, “Little girl, you must have me confused with someone else!” She perked right back: “Oh no. I know who you are! You're not Jesus or any disciple! You're the same pastor I've seen hundreds of times before.” The confidence of this little girl was almost too much. By this time, the visiting pastor had created so much congregational curiosity ... now he had to pursue things to the next step. So he said, “Well, honey, I don't recall ever seeing you before, but if you really think you've seen me ... then why don't you tell the whole congregation where you've seen me before so many times!!”

“Jesus breathed on them ...” (he transferred his Spirit of power to them)! From then on, they became bold witnesses of his forgiving & merciful power! Instead of acting like prisoners to worldly powers -- they broke out with good news of their freedom from fear, from sin and from death! The PROOF was in the transformation from fearfilled followers to professing apostles! That same reality holds true for us -- are we fearfilled followers or professing apostles??

Maybe we can best see the difference by considering our care of our children. If we constantly take over for our kids -- always paying for their every need & desire, always protecting them from any consequences, always solving their every problem -- they become emotional & psychological cripples. Every one of us in this room has had a moment when we've said, “I just can't do it!!” I certainly remember the first time I was asked to preach in my home parish as a high school senior: I said, “I just can't do it!” But thankfully, someone was there who said, “Yes you can!!” That's the power of the resurrected Christ! That's what Jesus offered his disciples when he breathed on them in the upper room: the spirit of “YES YOU CAN / and YES YOU WILL!”

That's the real PROOF of the resurrection of Jesus Christ -- when people in church regularly say: “Yes we can!!” We can forgive ... we can feed the hungry ... we can overcome guilt & greed ... we can have compassion for those different from us ... we can Call the very best in our new pastor ... we can serve those who have known disaster ... we can hire an excellent new director of music ... BECAUSE THAT'S THE SPIRIT & POWER OF A RISEN LORD WORKING THROUGH US! And even if we should fail in any endeavor -- we believe in a God who will forgive us and pick us up again to start all over!! The PROOF of the resurrection is a fellowship of believers who keep on saying, “Yes, We Can!!”

The Post-Easter PROOF of the resurrection is right here in this place every Sunday ... the breath of Jesus Christ through Holy Baptism, through Holy Communion, through prayers for the sick & suffering, through His Word in preaching and teaching, through every expression of the gifts of the Spirit: thru kindness & gentleness, thru patience and love, thru joy and self-control, thru faithfulness and peace! These are the powers of a risen Christ! You can't see them physically or materially -- but you know when they are present. And they are present in every congregation that is saying to their God and to each other: YES WE CAN! AND YES WE WILL!!

So people of Glenwood -- know that Jesus Christ is with us right now -- he is breathing INTO US his power and presence right now! And each time we say to each other, “The Peace of the Lord be with You! ... we are taking his Spirit and offering it to others, saying “Yes We Can” & “Yes We Will!”

AMEN.

The little girl got up, came forward and took the microphone and said:
"O.K. I've seen you hundreds of times in my mommies' bedroom!"

There was a long moment of stone silence. Then the typical titter of laughter mixed with embarrassment from the congregation. The pastor just stood there stunned. This was not exactly the kind of reappearance he had planned for this anniversary celebration. As the little girl was about to sit down, he noticed her name tag. All of a sudden it came to him! He had officiated for the wedding of this little girl's parents 12-years-ago. And sure enough -- in her parent's bedroom was a wedding picture of mommy & daddy with this pastor beaming radiantly.

Now aside from the humor of this story - it has a great connection to today's gospel. The only proof that little girl had of knowing this pastor was merely an HISTORICAL PROOF -- the proof of an old photo ... an old picture. Her relationship to the pastor was a portrait -connection! There was nothing personal ... nothing living ... nothing dynamic ... nothing spiritual ... and certainly nothing off color! Her relationship to this past leader was strictly a 10-yr-old historical print ... which had no power for her life NOW!

Regretably, that's the same portrait of proof that many Christians have for the risen Christ!! Nothing personal!! Nothing living!! Nothing dynamic or spiritual!! For them, the risen Christ is just a picture of a by-gone historical event!! These Christians come out once-a-year to take another look at the old photo book of Easter morning! But all they see is an empty tomb! The picture of Easter morning has no impact on their lives; it's just a scrap book of the past!

Jesus said to Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!" In other words, Blessed are those who get beyond mere photo reprints of Easter ... who get beyond pretty scenes of spring ... who get beyond nail holes and pierced sides! Blessed are those who get beyond the physical & material signs Easter! Blessed are those who have received the BREATH OF EASTER -- the very Spirit of the risen Christ!!

Obviously, it's important for us to affirm a first century picture of the resurrection! Without the testimony of the women, of the disciples and of Thomas -- we would not have any verifiable proof of Jesus' resurrection! Just like earlier photographs of celebrations in our lives -- we need those historical documents. They help us relive the past. Likewise with Thomas, we need the reprint of his encounter in the upper room. It gives validity to the resurrection of Christ for that moment of history. But the first century picture IS NOT THE LIVING PROOF FOR THE RESURRECTION TODAY!!

More than historical prints are needed if we expect a dynamic and living testimony for our resurrection faith! Before Jesus appeared that day - the disciples were hiding behind locked doors. They were living in fear! Instead of advocates for Christ, they had become prisoners of defeat! But we're told that

HOW CAN WE BE SURE?

A week later Thomas was with the disciples. Jesus stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out and your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe. And Thomas said to Jesus, "My Lord and my God!"

An old, weather-worn and battle scared Christian was challenged by a skeptic one day: a typical skeptic – rational, agnostic, arrogant, and scientific to the core. *Skeptic said, Look old man, you can have your religion ... there's no way I'm going to believe in the resurrection from the dead. How can any intelligent, educated individual believe in God ... or the resurrection of the son of God? I personally don't believe in anything that I can't see or touch.*

The old saint looked him dead in the eye and said: *"Son, have you ever seen or touched your own brains? Young man replied, "No, I guess I haven't." "Well boy, what makes you think you have any??"*

Isn't this the struggle of faith – the tension between what we can see and what we can't see. Like Thomas before that eighth day, we all want proof of the resurrection. *"Show me the nail marks ... let me touch the pierced side ... give me something real, then I'll believe."* A 2010 Rasmussen Report survey indicated that 1 in 5 Americans DO NOT believe Jesus rose from the dead – and this includes Xans.

The famous Lutheran theologian put it in different terms. He says most of us are either "summer" or "winter" Christians. There's the winter Christians ... life is all struggle & trouble ... all pain and paranoia. Winter Christians are always chilly ... always showing the gust of disappointment. Then there's the summer Christians – always a-glow with sunshine ... full of warmth and oozing with the Spirit of laughter and joy – no troubles, no trials, no heartaches.

Marty says real Christians are neither of these – we're all somewhere in between summer and winter. It means we are trusting of what we see ... but also trusting of what we can't see. Faith is not all summer or all winter. Jesus Christ does not slam the door on Thomas or anyone else fighting for faith. The facts are – someone had to take the risk to confirm that the risen Christ was the real Christ – not just some apparition or phantom who was claiming to be Jesus. Today – we don't condemn Thomas ... we uplift Thomas for doing what any and each of us would have done ... *"give us some proof ... we want to be sure!"* Thanks to

Thomas, we have a **CONFESSION OF FAITH** that has stood the ages:
“My Lord and my God!” This was the real Jesus!!

In counseling with couples before marriage, I ask: Do you have any doubts about your future marriage. Some will say, “Oh, no – we will never have any problems!” Those are the couples I am really concerned about. Any great mission in life is fraught w/ doubts.

So, what are we to do about Stephen’s testimony today? We are to become real vigorous witnesses of Jesus’ resurrection ... meaning, we are to stand for Christ’s life ... breathing, pulsing, waiting every minute to show his life in ours! +++ Dr. Dean Feldmeyer’s commentary offers great insights about witnessing. He says *“witnessing is not only seeing ... but sharing and proclaiming what we see and believe.”* (1) So I ask you, what do you think of when you hear the word “witness?” (2) Is witnessing a street corner preacher shouting invectives and damnation? (3) Is it a religious zealot knocking at your door and refusing to take “no” for an answer? (4) Is it the one who says he/she “will tell the truth, the whole truth, so help me God” ... and then lies through his/her teeth?

Feldmeyer says “witnessing is about receiving and giving” It’s about receiving the promise of Easter, then sharing that promise with others ... especially with the suffering. In short, Feldmeyer says witnessing has to do **WITH RESPONSES IN OUR WORDS & ESPECIALL IN OUR DEEDS.**

You see an accident on Monroe St – what do you do? You respond – you call 911 – that’s witnessing. You see homeless or ragged persons near Glenwood – what do you do? You take them to the GS ... you give them clothes ... and you may even give them a buck or two. You witness by showing compassion. And what you are saying when you show compassion is: **MY LORD AND MY GOD.** We are compelled to serve whenever we see suffering, because Jesus **IS OUR LORD AND GOD ...** we are about his mission!!

So you ask – what’s been going on at Glenwood this past week? Well, there certainly has been some **WITNESSING.** First, I must give kudos to our congregational president. Can you imagine – you’re sitting in your breakfast nook and the phone rings. The person says – *“I’m Tom Troy – I understand you’re going to see your church to the Museum?”* What would you have done if you had received that call? Most of us would have stammered and stuttered ... trying to figure out **WHAT TO WITNESS.** Well, Mira did a good job; obviously, she was pressed with too many questions. But thanks. Mira, for trying your very best. And guess where Tom Troy landed next? our front doors on Monroe Street. What a great way to start being GW’s Resource Pastor – my first day

(and next two days) I have reporters crawling all of the place. That's not the business of Lutheran pastors! So I said to all of them – **NO COMMENT ... I HAVE NO AUTHORITY TO SAY ANYTHING.** And as stated on the bulletin's first page – *“there will be no major decisions made while Pastor Melissa is gone”* ... and that's what we'll tell the Museum if they give us any options or any offers.

In fact, one of the reporters would not settle for my words – **“NO COMMENT.”** He asked for a person who could be on camera ... someone who would be visible on the **“matter of not being ready to make any decision.”** Like Thomas did for Jesus, the channel 24 guy wanted a real person ... a real witness. He did not get one! Like Thomas, the Glenwood witness that I called knew this reality: our mission is proclaiming the blood, sweat and tears of Jesus Christ ... not speculating on real estate deals with the Museum.

And that's the demonstration and application of today's texts from Peter and John. The “inheritance” of believers is not getting a few hundred thousand dollars for our property for the Museum's benefit. The focus of John does not call us to WITNESS to real estate deals. I sincerely feel Glenwood has been spending far too much time saying, **“Let's get some cash for this place,”** rather than saying: **‘MY LORD AND MY GOD!’** That's our mission. We are called **TO LIVE OUT** those words of Stephen!

When we forgive a neighbor or one another from our hearts ... then our hearts speak forgiving words. When we are grateful from our hearts, then we our hearts will speak gratitude. And likewise – when our words and actions are contradictory to **“My Lord and My God”** – then we will justifiably be called **HYPOCRITES**. Unfortunately, I fear the Museum has **NOT KNOWLEDGE** of our true mission at Christians!

My Glenwood friends – I give thanks for the news stories of the past week. Because they have helped us to realize that **REAL ESTATE DEALS** are not **THE MISSION OF GLENWOOD**. We are called to follow Stephen and disciples like Stephen – who have the guts to proclaim our faith in the risen Christ. And that proclamation is not only given when our bankrolls are deep ... when we can fully pay the bills. In fact, because those things are not true ... because we have deficits ... we should now clearly be about what Jesus calls us to do thru the great commission: **“GO OUT AND GROW GLENWOOD, baptizing all in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit!”** I fear we've done little of that in the last decade; we've been lazy; we've been relying on Foundation Funds to stay alive – our inheritance has been the gold of a **FOUNDATION**, rather than the **GLORY** of the risen Christ!

I'm sorry friends – but Stephen had no Foundation Fund. Without his witness to Jesus Christ ... none of us would be here today ... not of us would be Christians! He had to be bold ... he had to risk NOT FUNDS, but HIS LIFE! He had to say – MY LORD & MY GOD! But not only say the words ... but go out into the highways and byways and EVANGELIZE the world as it stood then.

So, my friends – let's get back to what Jesus has called us to do. Let's get eight people today ... maybe even ten to serve on the Council. Let' get our mission straight – not to be focused on real estate ... but to be focused on the everlasting resurrection of Jesus Christ.

AMEN!