Text: *St. John 20:19-31*  

+ Jesus, Juva — Jesus, help me +  

**Hearing is Believing!**

4bGrace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. (Revelation 1:4b-5a)

You have heard it said that seeing is believing. There is some truth to this saying. Many are the times, I’m sure, that we have been fooled by lies into believing a scam, a conspiracy, or a false confidence. P.T. Barnum, the founder of the Ringling Bros., Barnum & Bailey circus is famous for having expressed the fact that we are by nature gullible when he said, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” Wary of lies and falsehoods, we are skeptical by experience and slow to believe.

Jesus did and said many things that were witnessed by His Disciples. What they witnessed helped create their faith in Jesus, but many others (such as those who were part of that mob on Good Friday who screamed “Crucify him!” or Judas Iscariot) had also witnessed many of the same events, yet they refused to believe in Jesus. What was the difference? Why did His Disciples believe and not those others? Why were they saved, but not others?

St. John, writer of the fourth Gospel, attested that the Holy Spirit moved him to record certain words spoken and deeds done by Jesus. Why these and not others? These accounts, these words in John’s Gospel were recorded, in order that you might hear them, and hearing the good news of Jesus, that you might believe that He is the Christ, the Son of God.

This account begins on Sunday. It was the day after the Sabbath that marked the end of Passover. At least ten disciples were assembled together, behind locked doors. John emphasizes that the Disciples were filled with fear. They were still so afraid that they gathered together, hoping there would be strength in numbers.

What were they afraid of? They feared the opposition from Jewish leaders and the people. It had been a mere three days since Jesus crucifixion, death and burial. They were afraid for their own safety, fearing that what had been done to Jesus would likewise be done to them—that they, too, would be arrested, tried and put to death. (Ironically, many of the Disciples, with the exception of John himself, would indeed suffer a death similar to that of Jesus, but such a fate—their own martyrdom, would not happen yet.) They were afraid, because they were unwilling to trust that the LORD would protect and defend them, according to God’s own good and gracious will, for the glory of the Gospel.

The living, breathing Jesus suddenly appeared among His Disciples—in the middle of this locked room! Christ is indeed risen from the dead! Jesus is alive—much more so, He is glorified! Though He had not been given entrance into this locked room, He suddenly appeared! Having risen from the dead, Jesus has now also been exalted with the fullness of divine power and authority. He is no longer confined by the material, physical, temporal world, with its many limitations. Truly Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.
To those fear-filled Disciples, Jesus said, “Peace be with you.”

This was the first time that believers gathered to receive His gracious gifts from the Lord, which started the tradition we now call the Divine Service. It is called Divine Service, not because we serve the Lord, but that He serves us.

Jesus words have become our liturgical tradition—“The peace of the Lord be with you!” These words of Jesus are more than mere greeting—more than a just a pious sounding desire or wishful thinking. These are words of divine command—He gives the very gift that His words speak. “Be at peace.” And Jesus repeated the very same words a second time, for greater emphasis and multiplied effect. He who did indeed rise from the dead, also calms the fears of those who are troubled in spirit, and restores them to peace.

When He had said this, Jesus showed them His hands and His side. These ten Disciples became eyewitnessees to His possession of the identifying wounds from His crucifixion, the stigmata, in Jesus’ hands and His side. The nail holes in both His hands. The spear wound in His side, through which His heart had been pierced.

Yet, these stigmata were for Jesus Disciples, as they are for us, more than just marks by which we can clearly identify and verify the authenticity of the body of Jesus. They are also proof of the blood that Jesus shed. By His blood we poor sinners have also been brought back from sin and death, to righteousness and life. By His death and resurrection, we again have peace with God. By His blood, even now we share in the genuineness of Christ Jesus’ death, and His resurrection from that death. As Jesus, though we die to this life, we too shall be raised again from the dead, never to die again. Allelulia!

21 Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent Me, even so I am sending you.”

Then, our Lord gave them a new commission. With this one sentence God the Father and His Son forever changed the life of these men—at least four former fishermen, one a tax collector, one a political zealot, and the other five having had unnamed vocations. They received a new vocation, that of Apostle—Christ sending them into the world to proclaim the truth, the good news, the Gospel of Christ crucified, dead in the tomb three days, and risen from the dead.

22 And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”

With this breath and these words the Lord Jesus bestowed His divine breath—His Holy Spirit—upon them. Christ Jesus continues to bestow His Holy Spirit to all who believe in Him, because both faith and the Holy Spirit are receive from God as His gift.

Christ the Lord entrusted the Office of the Keys to this Apostolic ministry—it includes the responsibility to exercise Confession & Absolution.

The righteousness of Jesus Christ, and His alone, is the foundation by which the Apostolic ministers of God are empowered to declare your sins are forgiven! They have been given the keys to the kingdom of God, since Christ Himself has charged them with responsibility to forgive the sins of repentant sinners, and to withhold forgiveness from those who are steadfastly, manifestly unrepentant. These words of forgiveness are as valid and certain as though spoken to you by Christ Himself! These Apostles became the first in an unending line of succession who faith-
fully preach the Good News and administer the pastoral office as instituted by the Lord Jesus. You can imagine the joy and excitement with which these Apostles went out, and told everyone who loved Jesus the good news. “We have seen the Lord!” As such, Thomas also heard the news, but it was not until they were all together eight days later, that Jesus appeared again and met Thomas’ demands for first-hand proofs, and that Thomas declared, “My Lord and my God!”

This reading, appointed to be read every year on the Second Sunday of Easter, one week after the Day of Resurrection, has come to be known as the “Doubting Thomas” reading. While it is true that Thomas was skeptical and doubted their reports, it is unfair to lay the blame for sinful doubt upon Thomas alone. In fact, there were at least ten doubting Thomases in that locked room the previous Sunday! Likewise, there is a doubting Thomas within each of us. We too refuse to believe and must be shown the stigmata. We too must see with our own eyes that Jesus, who was dead, is alive again. We too need to be convinced with proofs unmistakable, or else we will not believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. It is by grace that our Lord says to us, as He said to Thomas, “Stop doubting and believe! ... Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.”

Thanks be to God for Thomas and his doubt, for we are the blessed ones who have heard the words of this account. We have become the blessed of the Lord who need only hear it, in order that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we might believe that this is the living, resurrected Jesus—the Christ, the Son of God! We who believe, as the Disciples before us, believe only by the grace of God through Christ Jesus.

The Gospel of St. John exists for our benefit. The Holy Spirit uses the words written in the Gospel of St. John to conceive and deliver faith within you.

31 ... these [things] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, “the One who [is alive] and remembers His covenant forever” (Psalm 105:8). Faith comes by hearing (Romans 10:17) the Gospel of the living Lord Jesus. “Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Believing in the Lord Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit, you have eternal life.

To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood and made us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Revelation 1:5b-6)

+ Soli Deo Gloria +