

SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER [B]

Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 5:1-7; St. John 20:19-31
April 7, 2024

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Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.
Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Today's is the Second Sunday of Easter, but in our Gospel, we're back one week ago. It is the evening of that very first Easter. The disciples are gathered together and they've locked the doors because they're afraid of the Jews — those who had Jesus crucified. According to St. John's Gospel, only Mary Magdalene has as yet seen the risen Lord. The disciples know that the tomb is **empty**, but they apparently don't know what it means. And so they've gathered together. They must be bewildered and confused about what had become of Jesus, as well as feeling afraid of the Jewish authorities.

As they are gathered together, Jesus appears and stands among them. And he says, "*Peace be with you.*" In that very moment, their fear is dispelled. John tells us they rejoice in the presence of their Lord. The anxiety and the uncertainty which had dominated them a moment earlier, now gives way to joy and peace.

That is what the presence of Jesus and his Word does. He transforms darkness into light. He reshapes gloom and doom into hope and new life. And those once controlled by fear, are placed under the gentle care of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus says again, "*Peace be with you,*" and he continues, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" And then he breathes on them (**blow**) and says, "*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*"

Fifty days before the great outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the Spirit here is **spoken** by Jesus — it is "**breathed**" by him **onto** his followers. As Jesus commissions them to go out, he **necessarily** bestows on them the Holy Spirit. For the Spirit is **indispensable** for the **proclamation** and **reception** of the Gospel. Without the Holy Spirit, no Gospel Word is spoken or given. And without the Holy Spirit, no Gospel Word is heard or received.

One of my favorite and best seminary professors, the late Dr. Gerhard Forde, once commented to my class that Lutherans have sometimes been accused of not talking enough **about** the Holy Spirit. Dr. Forde told us, that accusation may or may not be true, but, he said, much more important than speaking **about** the Spirit, is speaking **in** the Spirit. By which he meant, the purpose of the Holy Spirit is never to draw attention to himself. The purpose of the Holy Spirit is to get the Gospel of Jesus Christ **spoken** and **heard**. The purpose of the Holy Spirit

is to impel and inspire God's people *to speak* — *to share* the Good News of Jesus' death and resurrection, to a world that desperately needs to hear it!

One evening in Chicago, a cabdriver picked up a woman outside a hospital. And as the cab pulled away from the curb, the woman burst into tears. She kept crying for some time and the driver just didn't know what to do. Finally when he had to stop for a red light, he turned around and asked if something bad had happened in the hospital.

The woman wiped her eyes, tried to control her tears and replied, "*Yes, my mom just died.*"

The woman went back to her sobbing and after a few more moments of driving, the cabbie asked her: "*Are you a religious person? A Christian maybe?*"

"*Well, I go to church regularly,*" the woman replied.

"*Well what about your mom?*" asked the cabbie, "*was she baptized?*"

"*Yes*", answered the woman, "*she was. She was the best Christian I've ever known.*"

And the cabbie responded: "*Lady, then why are you crying as if everything is over?*" And he proceeded to remind her of Christ's promise — of the forgiveness of sins and his victory over death.

That cabdriver didn't speak a single word *about* the Holy Spirit, but he most certainly spoke *in the Holy Spirit*. And that's what Christ's commission to you and me and all his followers is — a commission, a sending, to speak *in the Spirit*, to declare the Gospel of the death and resurrection of Jesus to all who will listen.

Just as God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends his disciples — so he sends you and me. And when Jesus commissions, when he sends you out, he equips you with *great authority*: "*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*"

You may recall that one of the great scandals of Jesus, one of the reasons the Pharisees were so threatened by, and frightened of him, was that he presumed to have power and authority that belonged *only to God*. Jesus went around *forgiving sins!* Only God could do that! By presuming to speak for God, Jesus created a scandal, and they killed him for it.

Just so, it is quite scandalous, when that *same power* and that *same authority* is given to Christ's followers today. How can you or I forgive sins? How can we be so audacious? Isn't that reserved for God alone?

Brothers and sister, you can be so presumptuous, because Christ himself has commissioned you and promised you his Holy Spirit.

Now, in one sense the authority to forgive sins surely is reserved for God alone. God alone is the *final judge*. It is right to say that he is the one who

reckons us righteous or unrighteous, clean or unclean. **But** the Lord God *reveals* his judgement, he *speaks* his own word of forgiveness to people — by way of the Holy Spirit — through the Church! That Holy Spirit was *poured out upon you* in your Baptism. And just as God came to accomplish his will *through his Son, Jesus*, so God comes yet today to accomplish his will through the **Body** of his Son, **the Church** — through the baptized — through you and me. You and I — members of Christ's Body — we are now his instruments, his spokespersons.

Our good Lord Jesus spoke and so forgave sins. He spoke and so bestowed the Holy Spirit. Now you and I — the Body of Christ today — *we* are to speak that same Word forgiveness. Your Baptism was *your ordination* into Christ's own priesthood. So now *you* are commissioned and sent to forgive sins in his name. *You* are to speak peace in his name. *You* are to spread the good news of salvation in his name. When you do that, when you follow that commission, then you are truly speaking *in the Spirit*.

And this wonderful, good news of Christ transforms lives. It changed the disciples from frightened, scared people, into people of *hope* — people who would dedicate their lives to the spread of the Church.

The risen Jesus transformed the apostle Paul from a persecutor of Christians into the greatest evangelist ever.

The risen Jesus transformed Thomas, who was full of doubts, into a man of bold faith and conviction.

The risen Jesus transformed Peter. Peter who must have felt so guilty and unworthy after denying his Lord — Jesus transformed him into a great preacher who started the world on fire at Pentecost.

The Gospel, the good news, of the risen Jesus has transformed the lives of countless people in the past 20 centuries. That Gospel *gives hope* in the midst of despair. It *bestows peace* in the midst of torment and unrest. It *brings light* in the midst of darkness. It *gives forgiveness* in the midst of guilt and shame. The Gospel of the risen Jesus *brings life* in the midst of death.

Brothers and sisters, God sent you his own Holy Spirit, when you were baptized. And he has renewed and stirred up that Spirit again and again — whenever you hear the words of forgiveness, whenever you hear his promise to you, whenever you receive Christ himself in the Holy Communion. So now, as you have *received* the Gospel, as the Holy Spirit has been given *to you*, now I charge you to *share* that same Gospel, to *speak* that same promise and good news, to others, to your neighbors. Go and share God's own peace with them!

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