

Sermon – John 20.19-31 (Easter 2 – 2024)

**Two Things to Believe**

Let us pray: Lord God, heavenly Father, we thank You, that of Your indescribable grace, for the sake of Your Son, You have given us the holy Gospel, and have instituted the holy Sacraments, that through these we may have comfort and forgiveness of sin: We beseech You, grant us Your Holy Spirit, that we may heartily believe Your Word; and through the holy Sacraments day by day establish our faith, until we at last obtain eternal salvation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

<sup>19</sup> Then, the same day at evening, being the first *day* of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace *be* with you."

<sup>20</sup> When He had said this, He showed them *His* hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord.

<sup>21</sup> So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

<sup>22</sup> And when He had said this, He breathed on *them*, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

<sup>23</sup> "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the *sins* of any, they are retained."

<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, called the Twin, one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> The other disciples therefore said to him, "We have seen the Lord." So 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."

<sup>26</sup> And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"

<sup>27</sup> Then He said to Thomas, "Reach your finger here, and look at My hands; and reach your hand *here*, and put *it* into My side. Do not be unbelieving, but believing."

<sup>28</sup> And Thomas answered and said to Him, "My Lord and my God!"

<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, "Thomas, because you have seen Me, you have believed. Blessed *are* those who have not seen and *yet* have believed."

<sup>30</sup> And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book;

<sup>31</sup> 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.

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed,

Simon Greenleaf who lived from 1783 to 1853 was a key figure in the early development of the Harvard Law School. He is considered to have been one of the greatest legal minds of our country. He is well known for his classic work in the field of Law, *Treatise on the Law of Evidence*. But there is another book that he wrote entitled, *The Testimony of the Evangelists, Examined by the Rules of Evidence Administered in Courts of Justice*. Using his expertise in evidence, he examined the evidence of Christ's resurrection given in Holy Scripture. He concluded that "according to the laws of legal evidence used in courts of law, there is more evidence for the historical fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ than for just about any other event in history."

Greenleaf's approach to asserting the historicity of the resurrection of Christ has been influential to many Christian apologists who came after him.

Scripture gives us ample evidence to believe that Christ is indeed risen. And we have a skeptic to help us see this and believe the historic fact of Christ's resurrection. That skeptic is Thomas. The other disciples saw Jesus appear to them. They heard Jesus proclaim peace upon them. They told Thomas about it. But Thomas would not believe. He required that he see and feel for himself that Jesus was risen. He wanted the evidence. Jesus graciously obliged. And Thomas saw and felt the risen Lord. And thus he believed. And so we have the testimony of the skeptic. Jesus is indeed risen.

And he made the appropriate confession, "My Lord and my God!" That is what Jesus' resurrection means after all. That is the chief of miracles that He performed. He laid down His life and He took it back up again. While the devil's power is death, which is opposite of creation and life. He can only destroy. Jesus shows He has power over death, and comes to life again, and He obtains the resurrection to eternal life for all believers. And so, Jesus Christ is indeed Lord and God.

And isn't this what John expressly says is the purpose of his gospel. That you may learn from His signs, above all His most certain resurrection from the dead, that He is the Son of God. In fact, all of Scripture points to this.

And so, listen to the witness of John, to the skeptic Thomas, and the testimony of all the apostles. Christ is indeed risen. He is God, the Lord. And we believe this not just because we examined the evidence and are satisfied by it, but because Scripture is God's Word and it is true.

But Scripture also teaches us to say more than that Jesus is risen and that He is the Lord and God. Note the all important possessive personal pronoun, "**My Lord and my God!**" He is not simply the Lord and God, One from whom I am alienated because He would have nothing to do with me on account of my unworthiness and my multitude of sins against Him. No Jesus is my Lord, who has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature with His holy and precious blood, and with His innocent suffering and death. He has brought us near to Himself by removing all of our sins. See how patient and long-suffering Jesus is with the doubt of the disciples and Thomas. He is gracious toward us sinners who are full of doubt, and who live in fear like ones behind locked doors, as though Christ hasn't risen. But He forgives you, redeems you, saves you from sin, death, and hell, that you may say, "**My Lord and My God.**" This is the confession of the truth the Holy Spirit has led us to believe.

But then Jesus also gives us something else in this text to believe. Here Jesus gave the disciples the keys. The loosing and binding key, the power to forgive and retain sins. "**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any they are retained.**" The fifth chief part of Luther's Small Catechism deals with this. "The Office of the Keys is the special authority which Christ has given to His Church on earth: to forgive the sins of the repentant sinners, but to retain the sins of the unrepentant as long as they do not repent."

Christ resurrection has proven that forgiveness of sins have been won for the world. And now that forgiveness must be spoken, offered, and given to the world.

And so the church exercises this authority to forgive and retain sins. Notice that Jesus isn't giving the disciples and the church the authority to wish that people are forgiven. He is not giving the church an uncertain or powerless authority here. What does He say? "**If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them!**" "**If you retain the sins of any, they are retained.**"

So Jesus would have us believe that these words give what they say.

So, first the retaining of sins. This is the law. The Law is powerful. It is good, but it condemns those who are not good. It condemns sinners. These words are not child's play. When the Law says, you shall honor your father and mother, it is actually condemning you when you disobey your parents, and show disrespect to those in authority. When the Law says to you, you shall have no other gods, it actually condemns you, when you fear the world, and obey the appetites of your sinful flesh. When the Law says to you, you shall not covet, it condemns you when you are ungrateful for and discontent with the gifts God has given you in your life. And as long as you remain unrepentant, you remain under the condemnation of the Law.

But the purpose God gives the Church the authority to retain sins, is so that people may see their bondage to sin, to see fires of hell awaiting them for their sins, and to seek the freedom that God has for sinners in Christ Jesus the Savior.

And that freedom is in the proclamation that Christ has given His church to speak: the forgiveness of sins. The forgiving of sins is the goal and primary purpose of the Church. It is the application of Christ's work of salvation to you believers. When the church pronounces forgiveness, it actually does it. When I pronounce to you that your sins are forgiven in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, that word actually forgives you.

This forgiveness is not given you by my power or worthiness, etc. For I am a sinner in need of the same forgiveness of Christ that you need. But Christ has given this Word to speak, so when the called servants of God speak forgiveness, that is the very forgiveness of Christ that is spoken. Or when you, in your vocations, share the forgiveness of Christ with others, that is the powerful forgiving key of Christ that is used. But Christ in His grace has made His Church and His ministers speakers of forgiveness.

Dear Christians, how blest we are to have these truths that the Holy Spirit has brought us to believe. First, Christ is risen! He has redeemed us, and brought us to Himself that we may say of Him, "My Lord and my God!"

And He has also given the Church the gift of Holy Absolution, so that you know that the forgiveness I speak to you is the very forgiveness of God: I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.