

Sermon, April 24, 2022

John 20: 19-31
"Life in His Name"

The opening verses of today's reading speaks of the disciples first encounter with the Risen Christ. They were gathered together behind locked doors when Jesus suddenly stood in their presence. It then goes on to say that he showed them the wounds on his hands and side. These two actions were important in terms of the church's developing thought about the nature of Jesus Christ. By showing the wounds to his disciples it points to his identity as a human being. The disciple Thomas will, in fact, insist upon seeing the wounds. But Jesus suddenly showing up in a room where the doors were locked suggests a nature quite different than human.

In the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians Paul writes in reference to the resurrection of the dead, "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. It is written, "The first man, Adam became a living being" the last Adam became a life-giving spirit." This. Goes back to what I said last week that the early church often referred to Jesus as Second Adam. Keeping all of this in mind we can see why the Council of Chalcedon, in the year 451, declared the hypostatic union to be the reality, meaning that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine - the two natures rolled into one, so to speak.

Upon appearing before them he says, "Peace be with you". This refers back to the reason why the doors were locked. As the verse states, "for fear of the Jews". By saying 'peace be with you' he is telling them to trust in him and put their fears behind them. But there is also reason to be careful of how we read that. It is unfortunate that John makes such statements, and that his gospel may have something to do with the development of antisemitism in later church history. Yes, there were members of the Jewish Sanhedrin who had plotted against Jesus, but that does not justify condemnation of the Jewish people as a whole.

Jesus then says, "Peace be with you." once more. This time it has to do with his saying, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you". In other words, having come into the world, and gathering together followers, he intends for them to continue on with the work that he began. We are reminded of what the Risen Christ said to them at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, that which we call the Great Commission - "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." Knowing that this will not be easy, and that the disciples themselves will face great dangers, he offers them his peace. It is important that we keep that in mind when we face the trials and challenges in today's world.

At the end of the Great Commission Jesus also says, "And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age". This ties into verse 22 in today's reading, which says, "When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit". He had promised them that when he left this earthly plane that they would not be left alone, that he would send a helper - the helper being the Holy Spirit.

Notice that he bestowed the Holy Spirit upon them by breathing on them. The use of breath plays an important role in the Bible. In the story of creation in the second chapter of Genesis we hear that "the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life" and the man became a living being." Likewise, in the 37th chapter of Ezekiel, when the prophet is standing in the valley of dry bones, we hear, "Prophecy to the breath, prophesy mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live". Breath, naturally, has to do with biological existence. Without it there is no life. But it is also related to a different form of life - of life in the Spirit. Remember that in both Hebrew and biblical Greek, the word for breath is the same word for spirit. And, so, for Jesus to breath on the disciples, he is bestowing on them something beyond physical life, but a form of spiritual life. They will then be empowered to face the challenges ahead in the strength of New Life. We too are invited to take upon ourselves the power of New Life in the Spirit.

Jesus then encounters the one who has been called Doubting Thomas. He seeks proof that of what the other disciples have said that Jesus has risen from the dead. Thomas serves as a symbol of whatever doubts we may have. When Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". Again, this is really directed at us, that is, those who have not seen with our eyes the Risen One. Can we still believe? As I've said before, I'm sure that we have all at some time or another had our doubts, but doubts are not necessarily a negative thing. It can also be the case that in wrestling with such doubts we may actually find our faith strengthened and deepened, and as John points out, having such belief and faith will lead to having "life in his name" - a form of life that transcends mere existence. Life in his name goes back to the latter part of the Great Commission which says, "to obey everything that I have commanded you". To have life in his name is live a life grounded in compassion, mercy, and forgiveness- a life committed to the care of those who suffer, and advocacy for justice and peace - a life driven by the power of love! Amen.