

Easter 2B – April 19, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 4:32-35

I John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

This second Sunday in Easter is quite frequently referred to as “Doubting Thomas Sunday.” We hear this same Gospel reading from John every church year.

The story of Doubting Thomas is certainly a compelling one. We see a human side of Thomas that we can all relate to. Who among us wouldn’t be tempted to make the same declaration? We might not be so bold as to actually *say* it out loud, but we’d probably at least be thinking it.

“Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” And note what he says: Thomas doesn’t say that he *doubts* Jesus has risen from the dead – he says he won’t *believe* it unless he experiences the risen Christ himself. Big difference – doubt and unbelief. So maybe we should call this the story of “Unbelieving Thomas” instead of “Doubting Thomas.”

But that is a sermon for another time. Because as compelling as this story is, there’s another very important part of this Gospel reading that seems to get glossed over in our rush to encounter Unbelieving Thomas.

Remember last week where our Easter story in Mark concluded? The women fled from the tomb and told no one, because they were afraid. Today's Gospel reading picks up in a similar place: The disciples are locked up in a house, filled with fear. It seems that no one has yet moved out to declare the good news of the resurrection of Jesus, because they're all paralyzed by fear.

And yet, Jesus comes – despite the doors being locked – and stands in their midst. He extends the greeting of peace. And most importantly, he gives them the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the disciples are then able to move out in faith. Today's story from the book of Acts tells us a little bit about what the early Christian community, empowered by the Holy Spirit, was like. We're told they were “of one heart and soul,” they held their possessions in common, and “with great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

There is another famous Thomas – Dave Thomas, that is, founder of the Wendy's hamburger chain – that said we should *live* our faith. He said, “Don't wear [your faith] on your sleeve; roll up *both* sleeves and do something about it.”

The disciples, empowered by the Holy Spirit, did just that – they rolled up their sleeves and they set to work. Not only did they set out to fulfill the commission which the risen Lord had given them, they set out to live the example which Jesus had shown them during his earthly ministry. They concerned themselves with the welfare of their members. We're told that they shared their possessions so that "there was not a needy person among them."

This reading from the 4th chapter of Acts is quite frequently treated as a lesson in stewardship. Rightly so. It deals very explicitly with how the early Christian community managed their material possessions so that all of the brothers and sisters in Christ were taken care of.

This section begins, "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul." *That* is the underlying motivation for everything we're told after that. They were all of one heart and soul.

Exactly what does that mean? Simply this: They were all committed to living the great commandment – to love God with all their hearts, minds, strength and soul, and to love their neighbors as themselves. When we're told that they shared their possessions, that's just one way they were living out this great commandment.

But today I propose to you that this reading isn't only about the sharing of material possessions. At a much more basic level, it's also about how we share *ourselves* with each other – not just our material wealth, but all that we have, and all that we are.

We are a community that is constituted by the Holy Spirit. Like the disciples in today's Gospel story, we have all received the gift of the Holy Spirit. And, as Saint Paul says, "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."¹ He also says, "There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."²

Those whom God has called by the Spirit God has also gifted with talents and abilities. These spiritual gifts are granted for the common good. They are given for the purpose of building up the body of Christ.

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Author Robert Neff relates the following story about visiting a church service:

It was one of those mornings when the tenor didn't get out of bed on the right side... As I listened to his faltering voice, I looked around. People were pulling out hymnals to locate the hymn being sung by the soloist. By the second verse, the congregation had joined the soloist in the hymn. By the third verse, the tenor was beginning to find the range. By the fourth verse, it was beautiful. And on the fifth verse the congregation was absolutely silent, and the tenor sang the most beautiful solo of his life.

That is life in the body of Christ, enabling one another to sing the tune Christ has given us.³

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Or, there is this story, told by newsman Charles Osgood:

Two ladies lived in a convalescent center. Each had suffered an incapacitating stroke. Margaret's stroke left her left side restricted, while Ruth's stroke damaged her right side. Both of these ladies were accomplished pianists but had given up hope of ever playing again.

The director of the center sat them down at a piano and encouraged them to play solo pieces together. They did, and a beautiful friendship developed.

What a picture of the church's needing to work together! What one member cannot do alone, perhaps two or more could do together – in harmony.⁴

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And finally, another musical story about spiritual gifts:

The Stradivari Society of Chicago performs an important role in the music world. The society entrusts expensive violins into the hands of world-class violin players who could never afford them on their own.

Top-flight violins made by seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masters like Antonio Stradivari produce an incomparably beautiful sound and now sell for millions of dollars each. Their value continues to climb, making such violins highly attractive to investors. But “great violins are not like great works of art,” writes music critic John von Rhein. “They were never meant to be hung on a wall or locked up under glass. Any instrument will lose its tone if it isn't played regularly; conversely, an instrument gains in value the more it is used.”

And so it is that those who own the world's greatest violins are looking for first-rate violin players to use them. The Stradivari Society brings them together, making sure that the instruments are preserved and cared for. One further requirement made by investors in such violins: the musician will give the patron at least two command performances a year.

Like the Stradivari Society, God also entrusts exquisite "violins" into the care of others. God gives us spiritual gifts of great value, which remain His property. God wants them used. God delights to hear beautiful music from our lives. And God wants us to play for Him.⁵

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We live as people of the resurrection, people free from vain attempts to please God or win God's approval, because of what Jesus has done for us. We live as people of the Spirit, forgiven, empowered and gifted to go forth into the world proclaiming the good news of the Risen Christ.

Today as you entered worship each one of you received an "Offering of Gifts" pamphlet. This is your opportunity to reflect upon the spiritual gifts that God has given you for the common good, and how you might use those gifts in the ministry of this congregation.

How will you live out your resurrection life in word and deed? How will your life bear witness to Christ and the great commandment, to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself? How will you give of yourself, like those early Christians we heard about in the books of Acts? I hope these are questions you will ponder as you make your Offering of Gifts this year.

Amen.

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¹ I Corinthians 12:7

² I Corinthians 12:4-6

³ Robert Neff, *Witnesses of a Third Way: A Fresh Look at Evangelism*, in *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers* by Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 82.

⁴ Craig Brian Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 119.

⁵ Craig Brian Larson, *750 Engaging Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Writers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 726.