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Easter II  
April 7, 2024  
Text: John 20:19 – 31  
Title: A Repeat Performance

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. They were hiding out, as criminals normally do. The last thing that they wanted was to be discovered by the local authorities because they had no doubt that they were in big trouble. You don't just participate in the things that they did without any consequences. Their only hope was to hide out until things calmed down. No one else knew where they were, not even family members. The doors were locked up tight. They should be safe for now as long as they stayed out of sight.

That's where the disciples found themselves on the evening of that first Easter Sunday almost 2000 years ago. They had followed Jesus of Nazareth for three years, and they were convinced that He was the Messiah who all of Israel had been longing to see. This was the man that was promised as far back as the Garden of Eden, the Lord's Anointed One. His reign was supposed to begin a new era of power for Israel. He was going to end the control of the hated Roman Empire. By following Him, the disciples were sure that they would be rewarded when the time came for Him to lead the revolution.

All of those hopes and dreams came to a screeching halt three days before this point. Jesus had been arrested, framed, convicted, and publicly executed by crucifixion, the typical punishment for treason. All of it had been orchestrated by the scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and when Jesus was brought before the high priest and the Sanhedrin His fate was all but sealed. They used all of their political clout to make sure that Pontius Pilate gave into their demands so that they could maintain their own power. After seeing what happened at the governor's palace, is it any wonder that the disciples were hiding out like criminals? It was standard practice in that political climate to punish not only the individual who was guilty of treason, but to go after anyone and everyone who was even remotely

connected to him. It was not uncommon to have a traitor's entire family killed, no matter how old the family member might be. Given that reality, the disciples had every reason to believe that they were the next targets on the list, and to behave like criminals because of it.

On top of everything that they have been through in the past three days, including watching their friend and leader die an agonizing death while they abandoned Him, now they are being asked to believe the excited ramblings of Mary Magdalene. That very morning she and two other women had gone to His tomb to finish preparing the Lord's body for burial. Not long after they had left their hiding place, the three had come back claiming that the corpse was gone! Peter and John had immediately dashed off to see if it was true, and found nothing but an empty cavern with burial cloths where the body should have been. They went back to the others, but Mary stayed behind. Now she was telling everyone that she had actually seen and *spoken* to the Rabbi Himself, and that He was very much *alive*!

How could they believe her? There was no way that Jesus could possibly be alive after being crucified! No one was taken down from a cross before the Romans were sure that they were good and dead. Mary is either making it up or she's dreaming or seeing things. It can't be true. So, they sit in their hiding place with the doors and windows locked tight, full of fear, doubt, and outright unbelief. It's just too *hard* to believe!

You know how that is, don't you? The world around you makes every effort to convince you that your faith is a waste of time, and if you must have that kind of a crutch to get through your everyday life, then it should be kept to yourself. Every year at this time, the television and news magazines are filled with specials that investigate who the "real Jesus" was, and they turn to so-called "scholars" who tell us that He certainly existed but almost everything that the Bible says about Him is a myth. Or we hear from liberal theologians who claim to be Christians, but insist that the resurrection wasn't real, and that Jesus was seen only in a spiritual way. And if your faith isn't challenged by these enlightened

views, then you're told that you must keep it to yourself because every religion is the same, and yours isn't any more true than the Muslim's, the Jew's or the Buddhist's. It has even gone so far that some have said that an attempt to convert someone else to Christianity should be considered a hate crime even as Christians who try to stand up for what they believe are literally forced to risk everything or go against their conscience.

In spite of what we may want to believe, such efforts do have an effect on us. We live our lives in fear much the same way that the disciples did when they hid like criminals. We'd rather blend in with the crowd by acting like everyone else instead of daring to take a stand for our faith. It's much easier that way. No one wants to be thought of as "holier than thou," or as a prude. No one wants to get into an argument about what's right and wrong because truth is different for everyone. We all know that the two topics that should be avoided most of the time are politics and religion, and you and I typically do a very good job of following that unwritten rule. We live in fear, just like the disciples did.

But the Lord doesn't allow His people to sit in fear behind locked doors. The disciples found that out Easter night. As they sat in their hiding place, Jesus suddenly appeared in the room with them. Locked doors don't matter to the risen Lord, and He knows that His disciples don't believe that He has risen. But instead of rebuking them for their fear and disbelief, He begins by blessing and reassuring them. "Peace be with you," Jesus says. What a marvelous greeting! The Lord gives them peace, and then He proves to them that He is no ghost by showing them His hands and side. He calms their fear and shows them that they can believe that He is alive. Then He blesses them again, and gives them authority and power with the Holy Spirit. That authority to forgive or not forgive sins has been passed on to the church ever since that very day.

Now, it's a week later. The apostle Thomas wasn't there last week when Jesus appeared to the apostles. When he finally returns to them, they make sure to tell Him, "We have seen the Lord!" His

response has labeled him with the nickname “Doubting Thomas” ever since. “Unless I see in His hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into His side, I will never believe.” That’s good old “Doubting Thomas.” He has to see and feel Jesus in order to believe what he has been told. He refuses to believe any other way. He’s actually just like the rest of the apostles. They did not believe what they had been told by Mary Magdalene. They had to see and hear Jesus too. Thomas is only asking for the same proof that the others received.

Jesus is more than happy to give it to him. Once again, everyone is locked up in the same place. This time, Thomas is there. Jesus suddenly appears just like He did a week ago, and He greets them with the same words, “Peace be with you.” Jesus then offers Thomas the same assurance that the other apostles were given, and He gives Thomas exactly what he asked for, the chance to feel the wounds. After Jesus gives Thomas what he wants, He commands them all, “Do not disbelieve, but believe.”

Once again, we can see ourselves in the apostles. We know that seeing is believing, and our sinful nature persuades us to apply that understanding to our faith. We want the same type of tangible proof of God’s work in our life that the apostles had to see. We want the same reassurances that they received even though Jesus says that we who believe without seeing are blessed. Our doubt is one of the reasons that we try to bargain with God so often. You know the scenario. You get into some kind of jam because of your own reckless behavior, and then in your desperation you offer up a prayer that begins something like this, “God, if you get me out of this, then I’ll...” and you can fill in the blank from there.

It takes nothing short of God’s work in your life to overcome these sinful doubts, just like His work overcomes your fears. The Lord undertakes the task willingly because He knows that without His intervention you have no hope. That’s why Jesus went to the cross in the first place to give us lost and condemned sinners hope. Because of His sacrifice on the cross and His victory over the grave with the

resurrection, you now have the hope and promise of the resurrection as well. You can know for certain because you are baptized in His name and He has promised that because the grave could not hold Him, it will not hold you either when He returns on the Last Day.

That day is coming soon, but until it does we have been given a job to do. Christ has charged us with spreading His Gospel to the world around us with the words “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” He sends us so that everyone can have the chance to share in the hope that we have, and He gives us the very tools that we need to accomplish the mission that He calls us to. This morning’s Gospel ends by telling us about the best of those tools. John writes, “...but these [things] are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” It is by hearing His Word that people are brought to faith. That’s the reason that these things have been written, to bring us to faith, and through that faith to give us eternal life.

There is no doubt that we will fall back into our fear and doubt while we are still in this life. It’s inevitable while we are still infected by our sinful nature. But His sacrifice was enough to cover even those sins, and when He returns, He will greet those who have remained faithful with the same words that He greeted the disciples with that first evening, “Peace be with you.” And we can then boldly and fearlessly reply to Him with the same words that Thomas proclaimed when he saw Jesus face to face. “My Lord and my God!” My Lord and my God who Is Risen! Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Amen.