

A Sermon for the
NORTHERN ILLINOIS SYNOD
Second Sunday of Easter
April 19, 2020

Read: John 20:19-31

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

My name is Jeff Clements. I serve as bishop of the Northern Illinois Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Welcome to my home. Like you, I am staying at home, doing my part to slow the spread of the corona virus that has caused such chaos in our world. You and I are at home today, as our mission statement says, “for the sake of the world.” We are loving our neighbor in ways that do not come to us naturally. We are used to going and doing rather than staying and sitting. Thank you for what you are not doing out in public.

I come to you today with a heart filled with gratitude for the life-changing ministries that your congregation has continued in these very challenging days. Whether it is keeping a food pantry operating or sewing face masks, our congregations have stepped up. And, our congregations have continued to worship even though we have been forced to abandon our pews. Your pastoral leaders have quickly become proficient at new means of communications. They have been working extraordinarily hard to keep in touch with you and offer pastoral care from a distance. They are now meeting with your congregation councils and teaching confirmation in front of computer screens. Their hearts have been broken by not being able to visit in hospitals and nursing homes. They are grieving the inability to conduct funerals. Pastors with children at home are juggling their roles as parent, teacher and pastor without clear boundaries. I admire what they are doing.

I am grateful for the pastoral leadership of this synod, which is why I am with you today. Lent, Holy Week, and the celebration of Easter are exhausting times under normal circumstances. This year’s demands have been different but no less exhausting. In providing this sermon, I am offering a small gift of time, which I hope your pastors, deacons and other pastoral leaders are willing to receive.

Today is the Second Sunday *of* Easter. Have you ever noticed that “of” before? Easter is a season of the church year. It began last Sunday when we marked the Resurrection of our Lord. The church calendar invites us into a 50-day celebration of Easter, right up to Pentecost, which will be May 31 this year.

Today, eight days into this season, eight days into the celebration of Easter, it hardly feels like we’ve celebrated at all. Normally, this Sunday after Easter is usually a poorly attended one in our congregations. After all, it doesn’t usually stand up well to the grandeur of Easter. By now, it usually feels like the party is over.

In our sanctuaries, it usually looks like it too. The lilies and other flowers have usually been taken home and those that remained have started to droop. The joyous music that we usually hear on Easter quickly fades into echoes.

Even in a normal year, it would feel like the party was over at home too. Company would have gone home. The leftover Easter ham would be consumed. By now, if you colored Easter eggs, they've gone out in the garbage.

So, here we are this year on Second Sunday *of* Easter, feeling as if we have missed the party, or had it stolen from us, and we may not even be able to tell if there is anybody else in worship with us today.

Chances are, of course, that you are not alone today in worship. You just can't see everyone else. And, even though we did not celebrate Easter in our normal ways, we can surely celebrate the good news. Think of it. Have we really missed Easter?

Maybe we have! After all, we were not there when the angel rolled the stone away from that already empty tomb. We were not there to stand before Jesus, to see him with our own eyes, or touch him with our own hands. We missed Easter by, well let's say, a couple thousand years.

Thomas missed that first Easter too. Thomas was not with the other disciples to see Jesus when he came and greeted them that evening. I do sometimes wonder where he was because he appears to have been the only one who was missing. The disciples were more or less hiding out in fear. They had locked themselves in. Maybe Thomas had gone out under the cover of darkness wearing his face mask and gloves to get some groceries. Whatever the reason, Thomas was not there when Jesus came to them and showed the others his hands and his side.

I think it is funny or sad that poor Thomas has been called "Doubting Thomas." He had no more doubts than any of his other friends. Did you notice? Jesus walks in, says hello, and it isn't until he actually shows them his hands and his side that they recognize him. They had their doubts too.

It's just that Thomas has been immortalized by his words, "Unless I see for myself, I just can't trust that this is true!"

Can you imagine what would have happened if this had taken place in the age of the Internet? I can only imagine how Thomas would have fared.

One of the disciples would have sent a text to Thomas saying that they had seen the Lord. Then they would have posted it on Facebook. Thomas would have commented that he thought they must be kidding. "No, look, we took a picture." "Oh, I'm not so sure. It could be photoshopped. Unless I see for myself, I'm not going to believe you." Then, some of their other Facebook friends would take sides. "I'm with Thomas, you guys are nuts." Someone else would say, "Thomas is wrong. He's always wrong. He's been wrong since we were in youth group together." Isn't that what happens today?

Even then his friends, Jesus' other disciples, might have asked, "What's wrong with him? Why can't he take the word of his best friends?"

So, a week passes. What a week it must have been for Thomas! It must have been torture. The others seemed so convinced. Their relationship to Jesus had been restored. Not so for Thomas. He must have felt so empty. For a week, he lived not knowing that Jesus was truly alive, not knowing the truth.

Then, the opportunity came. They were all together again. Thomas was with them. Jesus comes to them and he speaks to Thomas. Words of comfort. Words of proof. "Touch me, as you said you must." Don't be unbelieving. No more disbelief. Believe.

The Gospel of John doesn't tell us if Thomas ever touched Jesus. What we are told is that Thomas right then and there confesses his faith, "My Master! My Lord. My God!"

Some have read Jesus' next words to Thomas as chastening. I read his words as if they were specifically meant for us today. Jesus said to Thomas, "Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe."

Those words are for us who missed Easter...that first Easter. We did not stand in front of the empty tomb. We heard no angel voices. We did not see our Risen Savior. We had no opportunity to touch his hands or side. But we do have Thomas's confession. We have the witness of the church. For 2,000 years the people of God have proclaimed that it is true and Jesus himself said that those who are able to believe without seeing are blessed.

I am so glad that Jesus said those words to me as he spoke them to Thomas. Because if I had been with Thomas, I would have been as untrusting and as skeptical as he was.

And, today, I sometimes think we are better off not seeing because so much of what we see isn't true and we hardly know what to believe. Photoshop can make any photograph a picture of something that isn't real. For me, it's possible that seeing might make it even harder to believe.

The point is that Jesus met Thomas where he was with the needs he had. That is the way Jesus takes care of doubt, unbelief and skepticism. Jesus meets us where we are with whatever needs we have. This is how our faith is sustained.

I am thankful that you are listening to me today. But I want you to consider why you are listening. Why did you feel it was important to hear God's Word today? Is it because your parents had you baptized? Is it because your grandmother encouraged you? Is it because you had one particular Sunday school teacher who was loving? Is it because you confirmed your faith at some point? Is it because you are part of a congregation that inspires you? Perhaps all of these experiences have brought you and I together today. Maybe it is none. Maybe it is a God thing.

I really missed the choirs and joy of an Easter gathering. But our faith is sustained because Christ meets us where we are every day.

There have been many times that I've heard someone describe a retreat as a mountaintop experience for those who participated. Well, that's fine. I have had those experiences, those times, when God seemed so close because of where I was or who I was with or what we had done. But I know for a fact, and from other experiences I have had, that Christ comes to meet us in the valleys too, the low places of life, where we need him even more.

When Jesus was raised from the dead, he bore the scars of crucifixion. The resurrection did not erase what had happened to him. Jesus comes to us today, wounded and fully understanding all of our pain and suffering.

That's what I cling to today. Jesus comes to us as we continue to stay at home and shelter in place behind closed doors. He knows the fear we have right now, the fear of getting sick, the fear of financial ruin, the fear of losing dear ones we love, the fear of being alone, the fear of death.

These 50 days of Easter are not going to feel like any we have ever experienced before. But, we can, in fact, we must stare into the face of our own fears and mortality with confidence because we know, we believe, that Jesus conquered death and that ultimately, we have nothing to fear.

Even though we cannot stand face-to-face with Jesus, I pray that you will trust his promises. Jesus comes to you, where you are, to give you peace. Amen.

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