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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
4/3/2016, The Second Sunday of Easter
Acts 5:27-32, John 20:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text this morning is the benediction Jesus speaks to us — to you and to me, to us late-born disciples so very far away from the apostles and the great events of his resurrection. Jesus says to us, and would have us take it to heart:

...Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. (John 20:29, RSV)

This sermon is about the holy mystery of faith on earth. I do not mean the mysterious parts of our faith, but rather the mystery that there should be faith on earth *at all*, for we have not seen our resurrected Lord. We are lacking the usual way of confirming something. “Seeing is believing,” the old saying goes. But we have not seen. Not yet. Still, we believe.

There is a famous passage in Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* that alerts us that the matter of faith on earth has something to do with God, and not merely with our usual methods of coming to believe things. The Luther passage is part of his discussion of the Third Article of the Creed. It starts off with the interesting combination of words, “I believe that... I cannot believe...” The passage goes this way:

I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the Gospel... (Tappert edition)

If Luther be right here, then if you and I believe in Christ, it is not because we are smart or anything like that, but because God has dealt kindly with us. The Holy Spirit has been dealing with us, working on our hearts, so that when we hear the news that Jesus is risen, we find our hearts answering, “Yes, I believe that. That is the kind of world I want to live in – the one in which Jesus is in charge.”

Now, if we have been blessed with some faith, let us offer ourselves to God that in some manner, we will be useful to the Holy Spirit in helping others along to faith. They too, should they come to faith, will not do so because they “have seen” our resurrected Lord, but because of what they have heard and perhaps for what they have seen in us – in those who bear his name.

Let’s begin this discussion of the mystery of faith on earth by taking a bit of a glance at our First Lesson. It is the story of Peter and his brave witness to Jesus Christ. Peter and the other apostles have just gotten out of prison. They were not

released from the cell in any normal way. Rather in the nighttime, the angel of the Lord opened the prison gates, led them out, and told them to go to the Temple and resume their preaching of the gospel. They do so (Acts 4:19-21).

Meanwhile the high priest, Annas, with all his supporters from the party of the Sadducees, do not know that the apostles have escaped prison. Annas convenes the Sanhedrin and commands that the apostles be brought to him so that they can be examined. But when the officials go to the prison to fetch the apostles, they find that the jail is securely locked, the guards are on duty, all seems well, and yet the apostles are not there! Then a man arrives with the news that the apostles are preaching in the Temple. So the captain of the guard goes to the Temple, arrests the apostles again, and brings them to stand before the Sanhedrin.

Now, here is where my lesson begins. My lesson is about “alternative faiths” and how hard it is for someone who believes an alternative faith to also believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The high priest, Annas, and his supporters from the party of the Sadducees are believers in an alternative faith. It is a particular version of the faith of Israel. It is a version that denies the resurrection of the dead. And if the dead be not raised, then, in their eyes, Jesus cannot be raised.

If it were not for their alternative faith, the first, most reasonable question that the high priest would have for the apostles would be, “How in the world did you get out of that jail?” I mean, a quiet and gentle miracle has happened. No one has been hurt. There was no gunfire. No prison bars were broken. No doors knocked down. Yet the apostles -- a significant number of prisoners -- have escaped. How did they do it? It would be the rational question.

But it is not the question asked by the high priest. He is swept along by his own faith – a faith that does not have room for a resurrected Jesus. So, he does not ask about the means of the apostolic escape but rather about why in the world are they preaching Jesus:

We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching... (Acts 5:28, RSV)

And so it shall ever be, I suppose, until Jesus comes again “with beauty and power,” and then everyone *will see* with their own eyes that he is the Lord. Till then, many people will have trouble believing in Jesus because of their own faith commitments.

The thing is, they might not even recognize that they are swept along by their own religious commitments. I mean, it is natural that, say, Muslims should not believe in Jesus. But there are plenty of faiths in this world beyond the traditional world religions. There is faith in reason, faith in science, faith in the *New York Times* editorial page. There is faith in our schools, in our teachers, in the convictions of our generation, in the common beliefs of our class or our colleagues. We all have some way of making sense of things – some fundamental

theory that keeps us from despair or from madness. And our commitment to these various faiths are so strong that it is no wonder if there is no room for Jesus.

The problem is not that we believe in science or modern convictions or the ways of our own generation. The problem is when we believe in them with such passionate faith that we leave no room for Jesus. I bet there are plenty of good scientists, for example, who believe in Jesus. I bet there are lots of modern, sophisticated folks who believe in Jesus. Their heart says Yes to him, and their logic is such that they can only view the denial of Jesus as simply another form of faith — another form of fundamental conviction that cannot be proved or demonstrated. Another form of faith, and perhaps a discouraging form of faith at that.

Again, plenty of people have heard about Jesus and something in their heart has said Yes. They have tried to believe in him, to live for him, to grow in his image. And for some of them, their faith, which started as small as a mustard seed, has grown and become part of them, so that they can hardly imagine life without Jesus anymore.

For people of our century, we are all in the same boat: if we believe in Christ and come to him, it is not that we have seen him and believed, and it not because we are smart, but because generations of people before us have passed on to us the blessed rumor about Jesus, and we too have come to believe in him. God willing, we will pass that blessed rumor on to others.

And at this point, the old rule remains in affect: the church has always grown through the beauty of the lives of its members. “Look how they love!” the world has said. “Look how they give alms, care for the poor, establish hospitals, create orphanages, pray for one another, pray for the city, pray for the world, prove true in their marriages and in their vocations. Look how they have hope that goes beyond the horizon of these threescore and ten years. Look how they spend themselves even on forlorn causes of love.”

If we believe in Christ, it might well be because we have been blessed not only by the preaching about Christ, but also because we have been blessed by pious parents and grandparents, Sunday School teachers, and maybe a pastor or two. Or we have been blessed by the sacred music of Bach or by sacred architecture and art. We might have read a moving translation of the Bible or been inspired by stories of the saints. Or perhaps best of all, we have encountered someone in our life who seems beautiful, and we have discovered that a key part of their beauty is that they belong to Christ.

Let us be someone like that – someone whose life supports the notion that Jesus lives and is worthwhile living for. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe. Blessed too are those *who are seen and heard*, and in the seeing and hearing help someone else along in faith in Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.