

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Today's text deals with a question asked by Christians of every age, both age in history and age in life. In fact, it's often verbalized quite clearly by young children: "Why do we have to go to church again this week?" The little kid might be the one saying it as you're trying to wake him up, but the adult looking at the alarm clock may very well be thinking it too. We went last week, and the Bible hasn't changed since then, so why go again this week?

The answer is given to us through the example of no less than the disciples themselves, who are shown by Jesus that hearing God's word is essential not only for bringing someone to faith, but also for keeping that faith alive.

As we go now to that word, we first hear of the disciples on Easter evening. They are gathered together, but the occasion isn't one of joy or celebration – at least at first. Instead, we hear that they are gathering in secret, hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jews.

And that's not an unreasonable fear. They watched as their Lord had been seized in the Garden. Some had followed to His trial before the Sanhedrin. They may have heard the crowds calling for His blood. Some had watched, maybe from far off, as He was crucified. Witnessing the hatred that had been directed to Jesus, they had every reason to think that such hatred would be directed to them as well. Their gathering, then, is a fearful one.

In addition to fear, there is also confusion and uncertainty. That morning, several of the women who had accompanied Jesus had come back from His tomb, claiming to have heard from angels that Jesus was risen from the dead. Peter and John had raced to the tomb and found it empty, just as the women had said. But they really don't know what to make of it.

Maybe Jesus had risen. Or maybe someone had come to steal His body. After all the malice that the Jews had shown toward their master, it wasn't too far fetched to think that they might want to desecrate His body, showing their contempt for Him one last time.

Now we might think, "But Jesus had told them, multiple times, that after being put to death He would rise again." And that's true. But think about when things in your life have taken a sudden and hard turn for the worse. Often, tragedies and hardships drive the promises of God from our minds, at least temporarily. Seeing and hearing of the suffering and death of Jesus had likely done this to the disciples.

So there they sit, afraid, confused, not sure what to do. Just telling each other to snap out of it and pull themselves together isn't going to fix their situation. They need something, someone else to come and help them out of this. And that's exactly what happens.

As they hide there in that locked room, suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. His presence by itself says so many things to answer their questions and allay their fears. He is risen. He has

conquered death. He cannot be separated from His own. And yet it's so incredible that the disciples can't quite handle it.

And so Jesus speaks His word to them. What is the first thing He says? "Peace be with you." Not an explanation, though those will come. Not a rebuke, though that will come later as well. No, Jesus begins by giving His disciples peace. And this isn't just a nice sentiment, Jesus hoping that they're doing well and all. No, Jesus is God, and so His words do what they say. He says "Peace be with you," and at that moment they are given peace. They have peace, as He has forgiven them for abandoning Him in the Garden. They have peace, as He has paid for all their sins on the cross. They have peace, because He has conquered death and so they too will live forever.

He shows them His hands and side, proofs that He has won them this peace. He gives them the Holy Spirit in special measure and allows them to forgive sins and grant His peace to others. And then, for reasons that neither He nor the Evangelist mention, He departs. But while they might not be able to see Him, His word of peace is still there for them.

I'm sure after Jesus departed that the disciples continued in their joy. How could they not? Thomas, who had been somewhere else, rejoins them, and they enthusiastically declare, "We have seen the Lord!"

But how does Thomas respond? "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." Strong words. Words of doubt, reflecting the fear and uncertainty that all the disciples had felt before Jesus had appeared to them and given them His peace. Try as they might, they cannot by their joy alone convince Thomas that Jesus is in fact risen.

Not only do they not convince Thomas, but we see something else happen. The text picks back up eight days later, which is the Jewish way of saying, "a week later" – the following Sunday. Where do we find the disciples? Back in the same room, again with the doors locked. It seems that the fear and uncertainty had managed to creep back in.

After Jesus had appeared, they had been full of joy and peace, confident in their risen Lord and His victory over death. But as the week had gone by, as they were reminded of the world's hatred for Jesus, as they recalled their own sins and doubts, they had ended up pretty much where they had been.

How do they get out of this? The same way as last time! Jesus! As He did the week before, Jesus comes again and stands in their midst, showing forth His resurrection by His presence. And then as He also did the week before, Jesus' first words to His disciples are, "Peace be with you." He once again forgives their sins and restores them, just as He had done seven days prior. Whatever they had done in those days – their doubts, their disbelief, their fears – He took away with His word of peace to them.

Jesus then has more words, this time specifically addressing Thomas's disbelief. "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side." The Lord shows that He was still watching over His disciples, even though they couldn't see Him there, and that He was

aware of their problems. He heard Thomas's objections and addressed them. Jesus gives both a rebuke and a consolation through showing His hands and side.

Jesus then speaks and addresses what is the most serious part of Thomas's objection from the week before. Thomas ended His reply to the disciples by saying that, unless things were to His satisfaction, He would never believe. Jesus, then, ends His reply to Thomas with the words, "Do not disbelieve, but believe."

Similar to Jesus' words of peace, which as the words of God actually give peace, Jesus' words here to Thomas aren't merely a call to look at the evidence and reach the logical decision, but are words that actually drive unbelief from Thomas's heart and replace it with belief. Just like when He said, "Let there be light," and there was light, or when He told a paralytic to pick up His bed and walk home and the man did, Jesus here by the power of His word restores faith in the heart of Thomas. Seeing Jesus, and touching His wounds, certainly helped Thomas come back to faith. But as Jesus tells him, it is more blessed to believe even without seeing. It is more blessed to hear and believe the word.

That's where St. John comes in as the divinely-inspired scribe of this gospel and puts in a note for all who would read this – including us today. He says, "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name."

The evangelist tells us that Jesus did many other things; so many, he says at the very end of his gospel, that if they were all written down, there wouldn't be enough books in the world to contain them. But seeing those things isn't what creates faith. Receiving those miracles isn't what sustains faith. No, it is the word. It's the things written in this book, this "biblios" in the Greek. That's where the word "Bible" comes from.

The Bible has been given to us by God the Holy Spirit, working through the pens of the various prophets, apostles, and evangelists. He has given to us His word, the word of God, and it is through this word that faith is granted. These things have been written – all of them, not just some – so that you may believe.

The Holy Spirit uses different parts of the word to do different things. Sometimes it is there to comfort us in our sorrow. Sometimes it is there to correct us in our error. Sometimes it is to teach us in our ignorance. Sometimes it is there to train us in the path of righteousness. And often many of these at the same time. But these are always tied to faith, and faith, then, to having eternal life in the name of Jesus.

Faith is constantly under attack from the devil, the world, and our sinful flesh. And even when it isn't being attacked, faith is a living thing and needs to be fed. Like the disciples – who beheld the risen Christ one day and then a week later were back in their fear and doubt, needing to again hear the words of Jesus – we too constantly need to hear the words of Jesus, that our fears and doubt may be replaced with peace and belief.

When we gather together, our Lord comes into our midst and gives us peace through His word, and through His risen body present in Communion. He grants this to us week after week, even day after day as we read our Bibles at home.

Though we cannot see Jesus as Thomas and the other disciples did, He is still with us. He still speaks His word to us. He still gives His peace to us. Why do we go to church again this week? So that we may believe that Jesus is the Christ, and that by believing we may have life in His name.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!