

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

It's a wonderful thing to get to exclaim that on Easter morning. We'd been waiting, waiting through the season of Lent and holding back from alleluias, waiting through Maundy Thursday and Good Friday as we thought more and more on the suffering and death of our Lord, waiting through Holy Saturday as our Lord rested in the tomb and we're sort of in this strange, in-between time.

But then, on Easter, we get to unveil the crosses and put out the lilies and sing the joyous hymns that Christians have been singing for centuries as we rejoice in our Lord's victory over death. Easter truly is the highest, holiest, most joyous day of the year.

But then comes Monday. And then Tuesday, and Wednesday, and on and on. You go back to work. You go back to the "usual." And the joy of Easter can seem to lose its joyfulness. By the time you get back here the following Sunday, it's not quite the same. The lilies aren't quite as fragrant, the white paraments don't seem quite as bright, the "new" from last Sunday has seemed to have worn off.

What happened? And what do we do about it? That's what we'll consider as we look at the Gospel lesson for this morning.

The first part of the Gospel takes place the evening of that first Easter. The disciples are gathered together in a locked room. And it's not locked just out of concerns for privacy.

The disciples are scared. They saw their Lord be dragged away by a mob, and they all fled in terror. Two had followed to the high priest's residence, but one of those, Peter, ended up denying that he knew Jesus at all. Their Master had been crucified and then put in a tomb.

If the Romans could be persuaded to do this to Jesus as a supposed rebel, then that would make the disciples all rebels as well, and under the same sentence. They are scared.

Yet even by that evening, they'd had reason not to be. That morning, the women had come and told them that the tomb was empty.

Peter and John had run off and seen that this was the case, even noting that the grave clothes were still there and the face cloth was neatly folded up – not something a grave robber would take the time to do.

And after they had gone back to their homes, Mary Magdalene had come and told them the wonderful news – she had seen the Lord! He had risen!

Joyous news – if they'd believed it. But what did they do? Stayed hidden behind locked doors. They didn't go to Galilee, as Jesus had said before His death, and which the angels had reminded the women to tell the disciples. They stayed put, held captive by fear.

But then, Jesus appears. He is the one who sets the captives free, free from sin, free from death, free from fear. He speaks those wonderful words to them, "Peace be with you," and they are given peace.

Their abandoning Him in the Garden, their lack of trust as they hid, their failure to believe the words of the women whom He had sent to them, it's all forgiven in those words: "Peace be with you." They are no longer in fear, but are glad when they see the Lord.

It is Easter, and their Lord's victory over the grave is made visible as He stands before them. Perhaps they even cried out alleluias at the sight, rejoicing in the God who kept His promise. It was the highest, holiest, most joyous day they had ever experienced.

But then Jesus departs, and Sunday leads to Monday, to Tuesday, and so on. What do the disciples do? Do they go to Galilee as Jesus had told them to? Do they go about proclaiming the resurrection, telling others that Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, that He who was crucified has risen? Nope. They don't do any of that.

As the next Sunday rolls around, where do we find them? They're in a locked room again, holed up, still in Jerusalem. They've got Thomas with them now, but his words thus far have been rather pessimistic. Unless he sees the wounds and touches the risen body, he will not believe. The rest of the disciples had not believed when Mary told them that she had seen the Lord; Thomas replied in the same way to their words.

A week has passed since that joyful Easter day, and these closest followers of Jesus are seemingly right back where they started.

Isn't this somewhere that we can find ourselves, also? We have wonderful moments, times when the Lord grants us joy and peace, confidence in His Word, strengthening of our faith. But then the moments pass, and life goes on. Our lives are spent in a sinful world, and that world will tempt and assault us, seeking to rob us of that joy, peace, and confidence the Lord has given us.

We hear about how the Lord God guided all of history, steering governors, councils, kings, and even emperors to bring His Son to from a stable in Bethlehem to a cross outside Jerusalem, controlling countless forces to bring about our salvation, and it gives us a wonderful sense of peace. But then we turn on the TV or glance at the news on our phones and wonder, well, is God really in control of it all? Is He really guiding all things, even these disasters and wars and corrupt politicians, for the sake of His bride, the Church?

Or we hear of Jesus Christ, who in love and power cured lepers and restored paralyzed limbs and made those blind from birth to see and even brought rotting corpses back to life. But then we get the phone call, or hear the diagnosis from the doctor, and we wonder, will God uphold my life or the life of my loved one as He has promised to?

We hear the great news of Easter, that Jesus Christ has triumphed over death and the grave, that He has broken the powers of hell, that all who are joined to Him will share in this resurrection because He has promised it and God the Father doesn't resurrect lying blasphemers. We hear this, but then we worry about what will happen tomorrow, what if I die, what if my loved ones are taken from me by death?

And these doubts aren't occasional. The prince of the world is constantly bombarding you with them, at work, at school, on the internet, from friends, from family, from everywhere. In fact, they are so often present that we often forget they are there, though their effects on us are very much still there.

Hence how we can go from confidence to worry, courage to fear, faith to doubt, in a very short while. We too can be just like those disciples, hiding in a locked room not a week after seeing Christ Himself.

So what do we do? Well, what did the disciples do? Or, more accurately, what did the Lord do to the disciples? Once again, He came to them.

Once again, the following Sunday, He spoke those words of Absolution, “Peace be with you,” forgiving anew all their sins and unbelief, reconciling them to Himself once more. To Thomas, He offered His hands and side, letting this doubting apostle not only see, but touch His risen body.

In short, He once again gave them His Word, His promises, backed up with His real presence among them. It wasn’t anything flashy, no angelic choirs like at His birth, no blazing glory like the Mount of Transfiguration, no massive earthquakes like at His death or the opening of the tomb. Just simple words, simple presence. And yet through them the disciples are given forgiveness, peace, and joy.

Isn’t this also how our Lord comes to us, week after week? We gather together, His disciples, His Church, on the day He rose. Perhaps we have had a good week, and we come here still feeling confident and hopeful. Perhaps we’ve had a bad week, and are worn down from the struggles of temptation and stress and illness and a thousand other things.

Yet however we are, our Lord comes to us, and at the beginning of our gathering, He speaks and gives us His peace. He lets you know that all your sins – all of them, every one, big and small – are wiped out, washed away. He has paid for them on the cross and once again announces that He gives you peace.

He then speaks to you in His Word, the Holy Scriptures. In the Gospel, we read that Jesus breathed on His disciples and spoke to them. For us today, we are given the Bible, which is inspired – literally “God-breathed” in the Greek. God breathes on you as He speaks to you, and through this His breath, His Spirit enters you and enlivens you, strengthening your faith, chasing away your fears, quieting your doubts.

And then He offers His body to you, inviting you as He did to Thomas to reach out and take hold of Him, to know that He is risen and risen for you.

And He does this week after week, coming to His followers from that first Easter Sunday up to today and on and on until the Last Day when He returns in glory. He will continue to gather His people together and give them His gifts, and not even the gates of Hades will be able to stop it.

Now maybe we’re tempted to think that this would all be a lot more effective if Jesus stood here as a man and did all this as He did in that locked room. Maybe with a little more glory, and little more of the openly miraculous, we’d continue longer in our feelings of joy and confidence and peace.

It’s a tempting thought, for sure. But our Lord has good reasons for why He doesn’t do that. For one, it just doesn’t work. Signs may be impressive, but by themselves they don’t create or sustain lasting faith.

Just consider all the examples in Scripture. The Lord smites Egypt with incredible power, parts a sea, rains bread from heaven, and what do His people do? Complain endlessly, accuse Him of bring them out of Egypt to kill them, and set up a golden calf to worship.

Jesus performs sign after sign during His ministry, and yet what's the request He's constantly getting? Show us a sign. Just one more, and we'll believe.

Jesus, back from the dead, stands in the midst of His disciples on the first Easter evening, and where are the disciples the next week? Back in the room.

Signs are impressive, but they work on our feelings. And feelings are fickle, they change moment to moment. To build your faith in Jesus on your feelings is like the man who built his house upon the sand. It's easy, but when the storms come, the house comes crashing down.

Looking for Jesus in what makes us happy, in what entertains us, in what is easy, has great appeal. But when the rains of suffering come and the waters of persecution rise, and they will, good feelings are swept away, and you're left with a wreck.

So instead of building on the sand of feelings, build on the solid rock of the God-breathed Word and the promises found there. That is where true comfort and blessing are found, for as Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." Or elsewhere the Bible tells us, "All flesh is like grass and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers, the flower falls, but the Word of the Lord remains forever."

What God says in His Word cannot fail. What He says to you there is truth. It's true regardless of how you feel about it – and this is a good thing! Why?

The Lord tells you in His Word that He loves you and has died for you. That's true when you feel it and are given joy – and praise God for that joy! – but it's also just as true when Satan is attacking you and trying to tell you that God has forgotten you.

God tells you in His Word that He will never leave you nor forsake you, and so He's there when you feel His peace and joy, and when you feel all alone, He's still there.

God the Father has made you His child, giving His only-begotten Son to pay your adoption price, and so it doesn't matter how many times the devil asks if you're really the son or daughter of God or what accusations he lays in front of you, he can't undo what God has declared.

God's promises are unbreakable, and they are His promises to you and for you.

The Lord Jesus didn't promise His apostles that they would always feel wonderful, or that everything would go great and they'd never suffer, as they took the Gospel to the ends of the earth. In fact, He told them that they'd have trouble, and that the world would hate them. And this is exactly what happened – read the book of Acts, for example.

Yet they could go forth in confidence, because they had their Lord's unbreakable Word. He had given them peace, and so whatever chaos and conflict the world would throw at them, they had peace with God, which lasts into eternity. He had given them His Spirit, and no evil could drive out that third person of the Holy Trinity from their hearts.

When the world rose up to put them to death, they could face it in confidence, for their risen Lord had given them His Word that they too would rise.

Your Lord hasn't promised that life as a Christian will be an easy one. In fact, He's said the opposite.

When you have times that are full of joy and peace, then thank and praise God for them. And when you have times when life is hard and trials are constant and you'd rather just go lock yourself in a room to get away from it all, like the disciples, know that your Lord is still with you.

Seek Him where He has promised to be. Hear His Word to you in the Absolution, that He still gives you His peace and forgiveness. Hear His Word in the Scriptures and in the preaching, these things that are written, as St. John writes, "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." Hear His Word telling you reach out like Thomas, to take and eat the bread which is His body, given for you.

He has placed you on the Rock of His Word, and there He will keep you safely sheltered in the midst of life's storms, until at last He brings you to paradise, where the peace and joy will never fade, where we will see Him face to face, and where the alleluias will ring out even more joyfully than on Easter, and into eternity.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!