

**“Jesus Came and Stood Among Them”**

Acts 5:27-32; John 20:19-31

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April 24, 2022 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Easter

In last Sunday’s episode of ‘As the Rock Rolls,’ you may recall that Peter and ‘the other disciple,’ at Mary’s report of Jesus’ disappearance from the tomb, had gone to see for themselves... finding her news to be true. We read that they both then **“returned to their homes.”** While we did not read further, as many of you know, Mary then has an encounter with a ‘gardener’... aka, Jesus... and then hurries back to tell the disciples that indeed, ‘He is risen.’ That, in her words, **“I have seen the Lord!”** I would have to imagine that she was almost speechless in her excitement to know that Jesus was NOT dead, but that, as we too proclaimed last week, some 2000 years later, **“He is risen! He is risen indeed!”**

Today’s reading from John’s Gospel begins by saying that **“it was evening on that day, the first day of the week.”** (Jn 20:19a) The night of Easter Sunday.

(And speaking of the ‘first day of the week,’ have any of you noticed that some calendars now list MONDAY as the beginning of the week? BAD CHOICE. If we really want to keep that day from becoming a ‘MANIC Monday,’ we would do well to truly ‘begin’ our week with the ‘SAVIOR’S Sunday.’ I’m not saying that it won’t still have its ‘challenges,’ but at least we would be reminded of who walks WITH us in the face of those challenges...)

Anyway, we read that on that evening, **“the doors of the house... were locked for fear of the Jews.”** (John 20:19b) After such a powerful, yet puzzling, experience at the empty grave of Jesus, the disciples were cowering behind closed doors. Not only fearful of experiencing the same brutal death of Jesus, but also grappling to understand just what had really happened to their ‘fearless leader.’

Let me ask you this. How many of you spent last Sunday night ‘trembling’ behind ‘locked doors’ in your home, ‘fearful’ of being persecuted for your faith? I would say NONE! As for myself, I would wind up taking about a FIVE-hour nap! Let’s just say that MY ‘anxiety level’ at that point was *pretty low!* Now, of course, our situations are much different. We have the benefit of those aforementioned 2000 years to know and believe that Jesus truly IS risen. That I do not have to fear for my very life because of my faith. (While not taking for granted that freedom... for there are still many places around the world where such fear is REAL).

This is not to say that you and I don't struggle with anxiety and fear in our lives. Fear of health issues. Fear of financial hardship. Fear of lost relationships... either physically or emotionally. Or spiritually. Fear of death. We too can put ourselves behind 'locked doors' in order to not have to face problems in our lives.

That is why we must hold out hope that just as Jesus came to his earliest disciples in their time of struggle, so too will He come to us. In our most challenging times of trial as individuals, as families, as the church, we too can be able to look back with confidence, knowing that '**Jesus came and stood among them.**'

In considering what those first disciples were given when 'Jesus came and stood among them'... and what we too are offered by our Lord Christ... I would suggest three 'action points' of His appearance that evening. One, Jesus came... and comes... to bring COMFORT for **struggles**... both **past** and current. Second, comes to COMMUNICATE the **present reality** of His risen Life. And third, Jesus comes to COMMISSION his disciples... US... to proclaim the **future hope** available only through Him.

First, Jesus comes to **COMFORT** the hurting. Particularly those who are seeking to be His followers but are experiencing struggles in their walk with Him. Dealing with **fear**. Like those that had put themselves behind locked doors. Or, Having **doubts**. Like... 'DOUBTING' Thomas.

What were the very first words out of Jesus' mouth when He appeared to the gathered disciples? Both with and without Thomas? "**Peace be with you.**" (John 20:19) No words of condemnation of all those who failed to stand with him as He hung on the cross. No criticism of Thomas for being of so little faith, for not trusting his fellow followers. Just 4 little words to put their minds and hearts at rest. "**Peace be with you.**" 'Because I am with you... my PEACE should be with you. Because whether in the flesh or spirit, I will always be with you.' I envision Jesus, slowly turning his head around the room, locking eyes with each man and woman in the room, as though his words to the group were being whispered in the ear of each individual. "**Peace be with you.**" By the power of His Spirit, a hand of COMFORT being tenderly placed on every shoulder.

How well do you and I take on this role of 'Comforter?' How does our presence... perhaps in a difficult, contentious, unsettled situation... say to others, "**Peace be with you**"? Instead of

giving in to the natural habit of telling someone 'I TOLD you so,' how readily can we instead say, 'I LOVE you so!?' How well do we bring 'comfort' into moments of 'chaos?'

It is such peace and comfort that Jesus offers to each one of us doubting Thomases as well. Not with judgment of daring to question. But rather, providing us the evidence to **COMMUNICATE** the truth of Jesus' life and love. What does Jesus do immediately after comforting the disciples with his 'passing of the peace?' The very thing that Thomas is criticized for asking for. **"He showed them his hands and side."** (John 20:20) For Jesus' knows that it is IN our very doubts, our questions, perhaps even in fierce denial of 'even knowing' Christ, that our faith can truly GROW. As I mentioned on my Thursday devo, one of the greatest apologists (defenders) of the faith in our modern era, Lee Strobel, was a devout atheist and writer for the Chicago Tribune who set out to debunk the Christian faith as so much 'hogwash'... and wound up being 'washed' in the blood of Jesus. **His search for 'truth' led him to confess THE 'truth', the way, the life.**

Just like that poor maligned Thomas, whose biggest mistake was verbalizing what the others were thinking, would also move from **critic** to **convert**. I think that it is quite remarkable that the guy who has this bad rap of being 'the Doubter' was actually the very first one to express a "Confession of Faith." **"My Lord and my God."** (John 20:28) **Like Strobel, Thomas' search for 'truth' led him to confess THE 'truth', the way, the life.**

And just what is it that so powerfully 'communicates' the true identity of Christ as the Son of God and Savior of sinners? A powerful **love** that made the **ultimate sacrifice**, but one that **death could not conquer**. \*\* In the words of that 'Doubting Lee' convert from Chicago, *"The Resurrection is the supreme vindication [defense] of Jesus' divine identity and his inspired teaching. It's the **proof** of his **triumph** over **sin** and **death**. It's the foreshadowing of the resurrection of his followers. It's the **basis** of **Christian hope**. It's the **miracle** of all miracles."*

The resurrection represents the hope that these battered, punctured, broken lives can be raised anew. The resurrection shows us that the grave does NOT have the final victory. **"By His wounds we ARE healed."** By the power at work within us through the RISEN Christ, we know that we can 'RISE' to any occasion. **"I can do ALL things through Christ who strengthens me."** (Phil. 4:13) By showing others the wounds that were healed, by God's miraculous power, Jesus

communicated his identity as the Son of God. By sharing with others our own 'healed wounds,' we too **communicate** our identity as a child of God.

After sharing God's peace to COMFORT his followers... and COMMUNICATING the truth of His identity....then Jesus gives his disciples their **COMMISSION**. They receive their 'marching orders.' *"As the Father has sent me, so I send you."* (John 20:21) And that *"When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (John 20:22)* Unlike the 'receiving' of the Spirit to do great, miraculous works for God at Pentecost, this seems more like an 'anointing,' an 'ordination' into the 'holy priesthood' of all believers. Just as we remember our baptism as a SIGN, a SEAL of our membership in the community of faith called CHRISTIANS. We are baptized 'within' the church [motion to Bldg]... for ministry 'without' the church... AS the 'church'...[people]

Fast forward from our John passage to the Acts one. These once trembling, fearful, doubtful disciples had now been put behind a different 'locked door'...

PRISON. And then, miraculously freed from their cells. To run home? NO. To go out into the 'temple courts' to continue to witness to the REALITY of the living Lord Jesus Christ. To BE the church. Which gets them hauled once again before the (corrupt) religious authorities.

And when they are given, in effect, a 'cease and desist' order for having *"filled Jerusalem with (Christ's) teaching,"* they respond that *"we must obey God rather than any human authority."* **They go from being confused and convoluted to confident and convicted!**

Just like those 'practitioners' of the Christian faith in the early church, we also are to fulfill OUR responsibilities to God, whom we are to *"obey over any human authority."* How are WE 'filling OUR 'Jerusalem' with God's teaching? How are we offering the peace of Christ through our words and deeds. Like Jesus, we are to be a people of **comfort; commissioned** by Christ to go out and **communicate** His true identity as the Son of God and Savior of sinners. The One who heals our wounds, who mends our brokenness. Jesus who overcomes every barrier, every locked door, every prison wall. Jesus... the TRUE 'Rock star'...

Friday I attended a Rotary conference whose keynote speaker was none other than world-renowned chef and entrepreneur John Folse. Shortly after his talk... which was a fascinating cross between his culinary career and a history lesson about Louisiana cuisine... I was speaking with a

Rotarian whom I knew from LC who recently opened a pasta production business, and he was SO excited. It seems that on his way into the hotel BEFORE Chef Folse's appearance, the two had a 'chance' meeting, in which the new business owner mentioned his desire to expand his business into greater distribution and marketing, but was facing many challenges and needed some guidance. Rather than brush him off, Folse greeted him very warmly, offering encouraging words of wanting to support new businesses, and asked him for his business card. Needless to say, my friend was stoked... not merely for the attention he was given, but for the opportunity to connect in a meaningful way with such a renowned leader in the food industry.

And indeed it was a great business opportunity. A rare occasion to connect with such a successful and recognized leader in his field. A culinary 'rock star.'

But in deference to Chef Folse, he's NOT Jesus. (Tho he certainly appears to have a strong faith in the Lord). My thought was that if we can get so excited to be in the presence of a famous chef, how much more should we be to be in CHRIST'S presence. Sure, Folse was gracious enough to bring 'comfort' to a young colleague... he is certainly a good 'communicator' in sharing the 'good news' of our unique Cajun cuisine. But guess what? You and I have even better information to share... the true 'Good News' of Jesus Christ. The One who satisfies our deepest hunger and thirst. Jesus... the Bread of LIFE. The King of kings and Lord of lords by whom we know that when we communicate his love and life to others, 'Jesus comes and stands among us.'

**CHARGE:** I leave with you 3 quotes. One from Peter, 'the rock' on which Jesus would build the church... THE Rock Himself, our Lord Christ... and that modern disciple, Lee Strobel. First, Peter wrote that *"Although you have not seen him, you LOVE him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious JOY, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the SALVATION of your souls."* (1 Peter 1:8-9) Peter reminds us of the LOVE and JOY that we who have not seen Jesus, but yet believe in Him, experience as we rejoice in the SALVATION that comes only through Him.

Jesus then speaks to how we are not to keep this joy and love all to ourselves, but bring to those who do NOT believe: *"...As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the WORLD MAY BELIEVE that you have sent me."* (John 17:21)

And finally, Mr. Strobel gives this thought-provoking statement about us who believe: *"Only in a world where faith is difficult can faith exist."* He challenges us to ponder that if faith is easy, is it really faith at all? As we 'step out in faith' into a world filled with people who fear and doubt, and need the faith that we profess, may we know that we do not make that 'profession' alone. But that the Spirit of the living God...