

## John 20:19-31 April 3, 2016

Every year thousands of people climb a mountain in the Italian Alps to visit the Stations of the Cross. Their goal is to stand in awe before a larger than life outdoor crucifix erected there. They walk along from one scene to another. There's the upper room and the Garden of Gethsemane. They stop at the scene where Jesus is on trial before Pilate. They walk the way to Golgotha. At journey's end they come to the cross where they spend some time in quiet contemplation of all that Jesus did and suffered to save us. One visitor noticed an indistinct and overgrown trail that led beyond the cross. He fought through the thicket and discovered one more shrine that depicted the empty tomb. He was surprised to see it neglected and overgrown with brush. Visitor after visitor had taken the journey as far as the cross, but didn't go any further. How sad, he thought ... they missed the best part!

When you read the Book of Acts and compare the sermons that Luke records, they all have one thing in common. They all take you to the climax of salvation history. And it's not the cross. The climax is the empty tomb.

Peter, in Acts 2:23-24, says, *"And you, with the help of wicked men, put Him to death by nailing Him to the cross. But God raised Him from the dead ..."*

Acts 2:32 *"God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact"*

Acts 3:15-16 *"You killed the author of life, but God raised Him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."*

Acts 4:10-11 *"It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead that this man stands before you healed."*

Acts 5:30-32 *"The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging Him on a tree. God exalted Him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him."*

Acts 10:39-42 *"We are witnesses of everything He did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him from the dead on the third day and caused Him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen — by us who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead"*

The pattern doesn't stop with Peter.

Acts 7:55-56 *"But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God."*

Acts 13:32-33 Paul ... *"We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers He has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus."*

Nothing that Jesus did or said can give us real, lasting hope if the message ends at the cross. Jesus could turn water into wine. He could heal the sick, the blind, and the lame. He could calm storms and feed multitudes. He could even bring people back to life from the dead. Jairus' daughter, the widow's son, Lazarus ... but they would all face death again. The ultimate hope is a Saviour who can bring us through the valley of death unto eternal life, and the only one who can do that is one who has done it himself.

Paul says in Romans 6:9, *"We know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over Him."* That is what we proclaim. That is what we believe but is that how we live? Do our Christian lives reflect the freedom from death that we now have? We have been to the cross and believe that Jesus died for our sins but all too often we live in grief and gloom. We lack peace in our hearts and have not lived in the joy that the risen from the dead Jesus can give us. Jesus is risen, and that should make all the difference in our hearts and lives.

In today's Scripture readings we see the results of the risen Christ in the disciples. They were changed by what happened that resurrection day. When they were convinced that Jesus was alive, they went from fear and doubt to overwhelming joy and peace. This morning we are called to look beyond the cross and to live in the light and joy and hope and power of our Lord's Easter victory. We are called to see an amazing truth. What is most amazing in our Scripture lessons today? Let me introduce the first candidate: Acts lesson - we see the miracles the apostles performed. Jesus had said that they would do even greater miracles than He did. And they did. We are called to witness their miraculous escape from prison. We also see how God leads and guides and directs the mission, how

despite the opposition, or perhaps partly because of it, the church grows and more and more are brought to faith. But what is most amazing to see here is what has happened inside the disciples. On one occasion before the Sanhedrin the leaders of the Jews observed that these were unschooled, ordinary men, but they had been with Jesus. You need to see the change in the disciples and how they had gone from terrified fools to messengers of the Gospel, all because they had been with Jesus. They are no longer afraid. They are no longer hiding in the upper room. They are fearless in the face of opposition and arrest. They are at peace, even in prison and they are examples of the attitude of heart that Paul would later write about from prison:

*“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

You see, Paul wasn't the only one who had that peace and that joy. You see it in those who were arrested that day at the temple. You see it as they are brought before the Sanhedrin. You see it as they are released and go right back to preaching. Pretty amazing!

Second candidate for most amazing: Revelation lesson - here we read about John's vision of heaven and about seeing Jesus in glory, dressed in a robe reaching down to His feet, golden sash around His chest, His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. John's reaction was like that of Isaiah when he saw God. He falls down at his feet as though dead and Jesus says to him, "Don't be afraid." We get a glimpse of the Trinity in pre-trinity language. Him who is and was and is to come, the seven Spirits before His throne, Jesus Christ. It's an awesome description, considering John had to try and put down words to describe the indescribable nature of the triune God. It's an awesome description of heaven and of Jesus too. How do you put heavenly sights for which we have no vocabulary into earthly words?

There's something else amazing that's easy to miss. John is suffering. He is in exile on the island of Patmos because of preaching the Gospel. He is suffering and he is enduring it patiently. He is calling the churches that are suffering to look up, to see the risen and ascended Lord Jesus. To have patience in suffering. To have joy in Christ. To have peace, despite their circumstances. What is truly amazing throughout the book of Revelation is John's perseverance in faith under persecution and the hope that fills him. He knows not only that Jesus died for his sins, but that he also rose again. He knows that Jesus has broken the power of death. Listen to what he writes at the beginning of his first letter:

*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete.*

Amazing isn't it? Eternal life - fellowship with God - complete joy. He goes on to talk about the forgiveness of sins that we have through Jesus Christ and he talks about the Father's love:

*How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.*

Pretty amazing. He actually got to see Jesus as He is.

The third candidate for most amazing is in the Gospel for today. Jesus comes into the locked room and appears before the fearful disciples to bring them peace. The ten disciples who were there were amazed at Thomas' skepticism. They had seen Jesus alive. Why couldn't he believe them? We read on and we are amazed not so much at Thomas, but at the others. They have seen Jesus, yet their fear continues. A week later they are still hiding in the upper room. No wonder Thomas was skeptical. Just look at what he had to go on. The others said they had seen Jesus but it was hard to believe. They had seen Jesus alive and were still just as afraid as they were before Easter, and the resurrection of Jesus seemed to have had no effect on them. Like the travelers to the Italian Alps, they have been to the cross but not the empty tomb.

Okay, so what's the most amazing? Is it the disciples' boldness and confidence in the face of opposition? Is it John's vision of heaven? Is it the story of Thomas finally seeing Jesus alive? How about all of the above? You don't really have to choose because there is a common thread running through them, and a common foundation that lies beneath them. The common thread is peace ... do not be afraid ... stop being afraid. Jesus says it three times in the Gospel. Jesus says to John in the lesson from Revelation, "*Don't be afraid.*" And guess what ... in Acts 5 the disciples have found that peace. They are not afraid to bear witness to Christ despite the opposition they face. Jesus greets the disciples at each resurrection appearance with the words, "Peace be with you." Despite opposition and persecution, they had peace. One more step ... there is a common foundation for that peace and it is grace. What separates our Christian faith from all other religions? The unique center and foundation of our Christian faith is grace. Without grace there is no peace. Without grace there is no hope.

Our prayer this morning asked that the fruits of the resurrection show forth in our lives. Jesus brought these gifts on the evening of the resurrection as He appeared to the disciples behind closed doors. He takes away their sorrow and guilt and fills their hearts with joy and peace. It took a while for that to happen for the disciples. It took seeing Jesus alive again and again. It took the coming and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. He commissioned them to take this peace into the world through His Word. Their first mission project would be Thomas. He refuses to believe the testimony they bring and he insists on seeing and touching. "*I will not believe*" is emphatic. These are words of hardened, determined, willful unbelief, not just weakness. Then Jesus graciously provided the proof Thomas demanded.

Consider the locked doors behind which the disciples hid. Jesus came in anyway. He breaks through Thomas' locked heart too. What's amazing? Thomas believes because he has seen. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed. God is at peace with sinners through the sacrifice of Jesus. Without Him we would die in our sins. The disciples were haunted by guilt in those hours after they had abandoned Jesus. What about all those times when have we abandoned, ignored, or failed to confess Him? Jesus came to bear our sins in His body on the tree or the cross. His resurrection is the guarantee that His sacrificial offering has been accepted by the Father.

This is the first message of peace, peace to you from God the Father. Through the risen Christ, this is God's message to you and the peace Jesus gives is to be shared. The resurrection is to be proclaimed. Beloved, we cannot put our fingers into the nail prints on Jesus' hands. We cannot touch the wound in His side but we have grace and we can have peace. The risen Christ has not left himself without witness. We hear His word of absolution announced, as if He is saying it himself. We receive in His holy supper His very body and blood given and shed for the remission of sins. Jesus is our peace. His wounds, manifest through word and sacrament bring to our hearts the grace of God. They give the peace that only Jesus can give.