

Sermon for Easter Monday – Luke 24:36-49



“³⁶As they were talking about these things, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them, “Peace to you!” ³⁷But they were startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit. ³⁸And he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹And while they still disbelieved for joy and were marveling, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?” ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate before them. ⁴⁴Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, ⁴⁶and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, ⁴⁷and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things. ⁴⁹And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high.”

Beneath the city of Rome there are over 200 kilometers of tunnels where Christians gathered and celebrated worship services in the early centuries. The catacombs of Rome were the place where Christians came together, and not only that, but they were also buried there. Something remarkable can be found in the inscriptions on the tombstones there. Time and again, the curious inscription “DIES NATALIS” appears on the tombstones. This means “birthday.” The early Christians called the day of death a birthday, because the day of a Christian’s death was at the same time the first day of resurrection to new life.

When the eleven remaining disciples met in secret, the living faith in the Resurrection had evidently not yet taken root in them, a faith that later Christians would bear witness to. They came to understand everything little by little. We see this in today’s reading as well. The disciples on the road to Emmaus had just returned to Jerusalem in a state of excitement, loudly proclaiming that they had seen Jesus. I can well imagine how the conversation among the Eleven must have gone: “Are they reliable? Did they possibly dream it? Do they have entirely different motives for speaking of the Risen One?” The question that arises for us here is this: How did these disciples come to faith, not only faith that Jesus truly rose from the dead, but that He is still alive and present today in His church?

One of them spoke the understandable words, “I won’t believe it until I’ve seen it myself.” But is it really true that everything we see can be believed? Nowadays, it’s possible to create very convincing images of people or events on a computer, images which appear to be real but aren’t. Images are manipulated to deceive people, so seeing doesn’t always lead to belief. Under certain circumstances, seeing can even lead to false beliefs. We see the same thing with Jesus’ disciples. While they were still talking and discussing, Jesus suddenly appeared in their midst. If seeing alone were enough, one would think that His appearance right there would be sufficient to inspire faith, but that was not the case. It says that they were terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost. They saw Jesus, but mistook Him for something else, a ghost without substance. That is why Jesus must help them to understand, and He does so in a most ironic way. He lets them feel with their hands that it is really Him. They can touch His wounds and physically feel them, but even that doesn’t seem to be enough because Jesus adds another demonstration. He asks them to bring Him some fish, eats it in front of them, and thereby shows that “Yes,

it's really me. Jesus, whom they crucified, I have risen! And now that you finally get it, I'm grilling some fish with you."

And Jesus goes one step further. All these physical signs are only one side of the story. Something else must be added, and Jesus does exactly what He did with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. He leads the disciples to the Word of God and explains, based on that Word, everything had to happen exactly as it did because God had ordained it. The source of faith flows from this Word. In this Word we will find the Risen One, who reigns alive over His Church and over us.

I return to the image with which I began. The first Christians proclaimed the Resurrection with great conviction, understanding the day of death as a birthday into new life. From the dark catacombs, the light of faith in the resurrection shone forth even at a time when Roman emperors threatened to uproot the Church almost entirely. The Church of that time is like the Church of today. It is still under pressure. There is much in our world that is dark and difficult to explain, and so some ask, "Is Jesus still here? Has He forgotten us?" And in those moments, that is when Jesus leads us (just as He did with the disciples) to the source. The source is His Word. Through the Bible and the apostles' preaching, we come to faith in the resurrection.

We see all this happening vividly among Jesus' disciples. He interprets the Scriptures and says, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." (Luke 24:46-48) Then they believed and became witnesses of the resurrection. Jesus leads the disciple to the source: the Word of God. Through this, they realize that they are not alone. This is crucial for us as a church, that we emerge from the catacombs of our godlessness and come to this faith. We do not gather here simply as a community of like-minded people or an association for a better world. No, we gather because we know this: the Church is not without a Master. The Risen One is present in her and lives in her.

As humans, we see the things of this world. We are affected by death, war, and other terrible things. As humans, we also experience many things in our own private lives that do not look like the hope of the Resurrection. Our lives sometimes resemble the lives of the first Christians in the catacombs. All around us, there can only be seen death and darkness. We live underground while others can live in happiness and joy just a few meters above us. Yet it is precisely in these situations that the Living One steps into our midst. He does not want us to remain alone. He comes and stands in our midst even at the times when Death knocks at our door, showing its terrible face. Especially then, Jesus takes us by the hand and shows us the day of new birth, the day of the Resurrection!

It is He who walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus. It is He who transformed the community of grieving disciples into a joyful congregation. He does not merely wish to eat fish with them in blissful silence but transforms them and sends them out to share the good news with others. The journey of those eleven disciples in their dark room takes a 180-degree turn. From a small group of fearful people who believed in ghosts to a vibrant Church. Their voices rang out from Jerusalem, through Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth: "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

Just as the Lord walked with the disciples on the road to Emmaus, so He walks with us. He wants to be with us. He wants to celebrate the Lord's Supper with us. Yet what He wants even more than this is for us to go to work, to our families, and everywhere we find people who do not yet believe in Him or cannot yet believe that He lives. We can give these people our full attention, just as Jesus did with His disciples, gradually leading them into the miracle of the Resurrection. Gradually, the disciples were able to understand, and so we too can gradually show others the Way from death into life. Since Jesus has revealed Himself in our lives so often and in so many ways, He can also be revealed to others. Because of this, we all cry out with a loud voice: "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!" Amen.