**Easter 2 – Year C – April 7, 2013 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY**

**Based on John 20:19-31 written by Pastor Paul Horn**

**Jesus Brought Gifts on Easter Evening**

**I. Peace to calm our fears**

**II. Forgiveness for his Church**

**III. Life to live forever**

**IV. Faith to believe it**

*19On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. 21Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” 22And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive anyone’s sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” 24Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!” But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” 26A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” 27Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” 28Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” 29Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” 30Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. 31But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

I don’t know about you, but at my house we receive Easter baskets, even when you’re a 34-year old man. As a child our Easter baskets were filled not only with plastic eggs filled with all sorts of candy, but also gifts – toys and a new shirt for Easter Sunday service. Where did that tradition begin, giving gifts at Easter? As Christians we understand why we would exchange gifts at Easter: because Jesus gave us the greatest gift at Easter – the resurrection of our bodies and life eternal in heaven. And so today we will see that Jesus brought gifts to his disciples that first Easter Sunday evening, gifts that are for you, too.

*[For each of the points of the sermon, I cracked open a plastic egg and took out a piece of paper on which was printed the name of each of these gifts.]*

I. Peace to calm our fears

That first Easter Sunday evening we find the disciples huddled in a room, perhaps the same upper room where they had celebrated the Passover on Thursday. Most likely they discussed what they had heard and seen that morning… the report from the women, Peter and John who had run to the tomb. Most likely they were engaged in discussion with the two disciples who had just walked with Jesus to Emmaus, and how he explained the Scriptures to them why the Christ had to suffer and die and rise again, and how these two didn’t recognize Jesus until they reached their home in Emmaus, and then Jesus disappeared from their sight! They then ran all the way back to Jerusalem.

As they discussed these things John tells us they were behind locked doors, out of fear of the Jews. If the Jewish religious leaders hated Jesus so much that they exterminated him this quickly, what would they do to his followers? And then, there he stood! With a resurrected, glorified body, Jesus begun to make full use of his divine powers once again, an ability that enabled him to defy the natural laws of physics. He did not need to open doors. And he greeted them, “Peace be with you!” This was a common greeting in that day, similar to our salutation, “Hi, how are you doing today?” But this was more than a greeting that evening. “Peace be with you,” “You have peace,” Jesus was saying, “in spite of your sins of fear, your sins of abandonment, your sins of denying me, you have peace with God. My death means that I satisfied God’s wrath because of your sins, and was raised as proof. You are at peace with God.”

If we were to read the read headlines today, North Korea rattling their sabers, a shooting and murder on Fort Knox, a shooting in Radcliff on Good Friday evening, you might say that these events do not leave you with a feeling of peace. If you were to do some self-reflection now, you might find that you may not feel at peace with some people in your life, family member with whom you have not spoken in some time, a friend who has hurt your feelings, an acquaintance who continues to agitate you. Upon further self-reflection you may find that you are not at peace with yourself, for the way you have treated your spouse, your children, your parents, a complete stranger, no peace with yourself because of past mistakes. Which means that you may not be at peace with God! You may wonder, “How does he see me? How does he feel about the things I’ve done? How do I get back to feeling at peace with others, with myself, with God?

Maybe you’ve heard people say this at funerals before about the individual who died, “At least he made peace with God before he went.” How do you do that? How does a sinful human being make peace with a holy God who demands justice be served for sins committed? Impossible! It’s something only God can do, make peace.

Jesus announced to the disciples, “Peace be with you.” You have peace with God because I am alive. You have peace, because Jesus went to the cross, he carried your sins of fear, your sins against your family members, your past sins that leave you feeling no peace. Since he carried those sins, God the Father’s anger burned against his Son as he hung on the cross. Jesus appearing to his disciples in the flesh is proof that God the Father’s anger was satisfied by Jesus’ death. There is peace between you and God. What I want to clarify is that this peace from Jesus is not a feeling. Feelings are a lousy barometer of how God sees you. Because you will not always feel peace. You will not see peace with North Korea, peace in the Middle East, peace with people in your life, you may not feel peace, but the fact remains: you are at peace with God through Jesus. Jesus brought the gift of peace that Easter evening.

II. Forgiveness for the Church

After Jesus rose from death, he would appear to his disciples and friends for 40 days and then ascend into heaven and make himself invisible. Since his work of salvation was complete, he had no need to remain on the earth. But he commissioned his disciples to carry on his work to share this good news. Part of that mission is included in vs.23, “If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” This is what we refer to as the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus gave to each and every one of you the keys to unlock the gates to heaven and to lock the gates the heaven, by either announcing to a fellow Christian that their sins are forgiven (unlocking key) or announcing to a fellow Christian that their sins are not forgiven (locking key).

The problem arises when folks question, “How can you judge your brothers and sisters in Christ? I thought only God judges?” In fact Jesus does tell us to judge. He tells us to judge fellow believers, when a Christian discovers another brother or sister in Christ engaged in willful sinning, and does not repent and continues to live in sin, they are to first point out their sin. And if this individual does not think their sins grieve God, if they defend their sins, and intend to continue in them, we are to announce to them, (Galatians 5:21) “Those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.” The doors of the kingdom have been closed to you.

It is not we who are closing the doors of heaven. Allow me to share a quick lesson in the Greek language and grammar. When Jesus said, “If you do not forgive, they are not forgiven,” in the Greek language he is really saying, “What you have pronounced to that individual is already true before the throne of God. You are announcing to them what their status is before God’s throne.”

Some may question, “Why would we be so harsh and unloving as to say this to a fellow brother or sister in Christ?” When in fact the Bible tells us that this is the ultimate act of love. The purpose, the Bible tells us, is so that they see their sins, see how they offend God, and how dangerous their unrepentant sinning is before God, and repent, and turn away from their sinful living, and turn to God. Then, you are to say to them with the greatest of joy, “You are forgiven!”

Again, problems arise when folks ask, “How can I forgive someone’s sins? How can the pastor stand up in front of church on Sunday morning and say, “I forgive you your sins?” Again, the same Greek lesson applies, when we announce to another Christ who has repented of their sins, “I forgive you, your sins are forgiven,” what you have just said is already true before the throne of God.

What a wonderful blessing Jesus gives to his Church! To each of you Jesus has given the authority to withhold forgiveness so that some may repent, the authority to announce forgiveness of sins, so that they may know Jesus loved them so much that he died because of their sins and rose because God the Father accepted Jesus’ death for them. Jesus gives gifts to his Church: peace and forgiveness.

III. Life to live forever

How many of you have heard of George Frederick Handel? Handel was a German-born British Baroque composer who lived in England during the 1700s. One day a writer requested that he put the life of Christ to music. He sat down and wrote the famous oratorio “The Messiah” in just 24 days. I’m sure that most if not all of you have heard the famous and familiar “Hallelujah Chorus” which is one of the songs from Handel’s “Messiah.”

A year later when the Messiah was circulating throughout England on different stages and concert halls, King George II was in attendance for his first hearing of the Messiah.  As the Hallelujah chorus began - concluding pieces on our Lord’s death, resurrection, ascension, and triumphant spread of the Gospel in the face of world rejection, the king rose to his feet in awe of what our God has accomplished!  He was so moved by the exaltation of our Lord he could no longer sit still, nor any of his people.  The whole assembly rose with their king.  And, of course, that’s the natural result of Jesus’ resurrection and God’s grace.  When the King rises, the rest of his people rise, too.

Death is not the end. The body may decompose in the ground, ash to ash and dust to dust. But the soul separates from the body to live with Jesus. And then, one day, the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. The soul will reunite with the body and live forever. Because Christ Jesus’ body was brought back to life to live forever, you, too, will rise on the Last Day and live forever with him, your King. What a wonderful gift Jesus brought you on Easter evening!

IV. Faith to believe it

People often speculate as to why Thomas was not with the other ten disciples. And we affectionately dub him “Doubting” Thomas, but if we’re being honest, he outright challenged his brothers. It was not possible that Jesus was alive. He died and was buried! “Unless I see the marks in his hands where the nails were and put my hand in his side where the Soldier’s spear pierced him through, I refuse to believe it.” There he was, just a week later, when they were all gathered in that same room, and Jesus again appeared, though the doors were locked, and extended the same greeting, “Peace be with you!” Then he immediately turned to Thomas and we can just imagine the smile on Jesus’ face as he reaches for Thomas’ hand and says, “Put your finger here. See my hands. Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas then gave a beautiful confession of faith, “My Lord and my God!” Yes, you are God! You have power over my sin, over my grave, and now over my unbelief. And here you took the time to prove it to me! Jesus turned unbelief into faith, by his grace, his love for Thomas.

Hasn’t he done the same for you and me? The Bible tells us that we were all born into unbelief, born not knowing Jesus as our Savior. We came into this world all alone spiritually, ignorant, and lost, destined to die forever without hope. For some of you, you lived in that state, some of you for a long time. Perhaps you knew of God, but you didn’t believe that Jesus was your Savior, and you didn’t know how much he loved you.

Then, someone shared the story of Jesus with you, and John’s words came true, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” By the Word of God, written down by kings, Apostles and Prophets and Evangelists, and preserved for us today, that Word of God turned your unbelief into faith. God the Holy Spirit gave you the gift of faith through the Word of God. For others of you your parents cradled you in their arms and carried you to the font, where through the power of the Word working through the water, the Holy Spirit planted the gift of faith in your heart and you believed, he turned you from unbelief to faith. And now, you believe that you have peace, because of Jesus. You believe that the authority to forgive sins belongs to you. You believe that you will live forever in heaven. By hearing and studying God’s Word, by receiving the Lord’s Supper, you continue to believe.

By faith you trust and believe that Jesus died and rose for you. Even though you and I have not been as privileged as Thomas to touch Jesus’ hands and reach in and feel his side, through the eyes of faith, we see him standing there among the disciples, our resurrected and victorious Lord Jesus! Yes, blessed are you, happy are you, because you have not seen and yet, by grace through faith believe it!

Tonight as you reach for your Easter basket, and pull out a plastic egg, to crack it open for some candy, take a moment and thank God for the greater lasting gifts Jesus gave on Easter evening: peace, forgiveness, life eternal and the faith to believe it. Amen.