Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter (C), April 28, 2019

John 20:19-31 (esp. v. 27-29)

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In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. The Word of God which engages us this morning is based on John 20: “Jesus said to him, ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.’”

# The women become Christians

What does it take for someone to become or remain a Christian?

What did it take for Jesus’ followers to become Christians? The women go to the tomb early Sunday morning. Their hands, their minds, and their hearts are prepared for a loving act of service: tending to Jesus’ corpse. At this point, they are unbelievers. They have heard Jesus say that the Son of Man must die and rise on the third day, but they do not expect it to actually happen. They certainly don’t grasp that Jesus is the Son of God and the Savior of mankind. Whatever Jesus is—whatever he was—*he’s dead now*, and there’s no changing that.

What does it take to change the women’s minds—to turn them into Christians? Jesus himself must show up. But even when he does show up, Mary Magdalene still doesn’t believe. She thinks that he’s just a gardener. She says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him.” Mary, still an unbeliever, does not recognize her risen Lord. Not until Jesus speaks. Not until he calls her by name and reveals himself to her.

At this point, the spark of faith suddenly ignites within Mary. She gets it. Jesus is alive. He actually is the Christ, the Son of God. And this changes everything.

# Ten of the disciples become Christians

Mary, now a faithful Christian, runs and tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.”

But they don’t believe her. Not yet. No, they’re still hiding out. Their worst fear is not unbelief; it’s being exposed as Jesus’ disciples. They don’t want to be known as his followers; they want to be known as unbelievers. They don’t want to be associated with the man who was just crucified—lest the same thing should happen to them. One of them, Thomas, isn’t even with them; he’s not even willing to gather with the other disciples, lest they be seen together.

What does it take for Jesus’ ten disciples to become Christians? Jesus himself must show up. But even when he does show up, the disciples are not glad to see him at first—not until he says, “Peace be with you,” and he shows them his pierced hands and side. Jesus speaks a promise of peace, and he reveals himself to his disciples, and he gives them his Holy Spirit. Only then do they become Christians.

# Thomas becomes Christian

The ten disciples, now faithful Christians, tell Thomas, “We have seen the Lord.”

But Thomas doesn’t believe them. Not yet. He actually says that he will never, ever believe unless God jumps through the hoops that he designs. “If you are the immortal, invisible, God only wise, let me see you with my own two eyes. Let me touch your scarlet wounds, or there is zero chance that you’re real.” Thomas is an unbeliever—and an arrogant one, at that.

What does it take to change his mind—to make him become Christian? Jesus himself must show up. But even when he does show up, Thomas doesn’t fall down at his feet. Not yet. Not until Jesus quotes him in his unbelief—“Here I am; touch me.” Not until Jesus tells him to believe—makes him believe. When Jesus speaks, then all of a sudden, Thomas’ eyes are opened, and he boldly confesses, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus’ Word turns this arrogant unbeliever into a faithful Christian. Jesus speaks faith into Thomas, just as he did for Mary and the other disciples.

# We become Christian

How about us? What does it take for each of us to become or remain Christian?

Does it take Jesus showing up and shoving our fingers into his hands and side—does it take what the unbelieving Thomas demanded? Well, I hope not, because none of us has had that experience.

Does it take Jesus showing up visibly, physically, or audibly at all? Must we encounter his body with our own bodies? Must we see him with our own two eyes and hear his Aramaic tongue with our own two ears? Again, it seems not. We haven’t had this experience, and yet, here we are.

We do not have all of the advantages of Jesus’ actual disciples and followers. We don’t get to see our risen Lord. We don’t get to touch him, or hear him, or even fall down at his actual feet. In this sense, we are at a disadvantage.

*Mark’s* gospel account highlights this well. For those of you who have been studying Mark with me for the past year or so, you know that at the end of Mark’s gospel, no one gets to see the risen Jesus. All we get is the angel’s testimony, “He is not here, but is risen.” Mark is writing to people who never got to meet Jesus themselves. All they have is the testimony of Mark himself and the other witnesses and apostles. The way Mark writes his gospel, he tells you right up front who Jesus is: the Christ, the Son of God. But then he doesn’t do much more telling after that. He *shows* you what Jesus is doing and saying. He tells you that Jesus is risen, even though you can’t see him for yourself. And then he throws it back on you, the reader or hearer: do you believe? Is this Word of God enough?

*John* likewise has this famous statement at the end of our gospel reading: “these [things] are written 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.”

Dear Christians, we don’t get to meet Jesus. Not like his disciples did. Not yet. Is his Word actually enough for us to believe? Dare we stake our life on this promise—on this testimony that’s been handed down through generations of men? Or, on the other hand, do we arrogantly claim that Jesus must jump through all the hoops that we design if we’re going to believe him—that Jesus must answer all of our questions about why evil exists and what precisely happens after death?

# Anyone becomes Christian

What does it take for someone to become or remain Christian?

What did it take for you? How did you become a Christian? You haven’t seen the risen Jesus with your own two eyes, so how did you come to believe him?

I bet I know how it happened for every single one of you—indeed for every Christian who has ever lived. You heard the Word of God. Maybe you grew up in church. Or maybe you found a Bible. Or maybe someone told you about Jesus without even quoting the Bible. Or maybe even you strayed from the church for a while but then you had memories of going to church and hearing the Word. No matter how or when the Word of God came to you, it *did* come to you, and now here you are.

And then, without you even knowing it was happening, the Holy Spirit made you believe that Word. He took God’s promises, and he whispered in your ear, “It’s all true, and it’s all for you.” The Holy Spirit gave you faith. He made it click. He made it matter. He made it the center of your life—in a way that you might not even have wanted. Just like he did for Jesus’ disciples and followers.

And he’s done this more than once. He does it all the time, in fact, as you hear the Word of God in the Bible, from your family and friends, from the pulpit, and tied to the Sacraments. Over and over again, God promises you forgiveness, life, and salvation. And over and over again, the Holy Spirit makes you believe that it’s all true and that it’s all for you.

This is the Christian life: we are continually fed and nourished by God’s Word. This is how we became Christian, and this is how we remain Christian. Because without this Word and promise of God, we’re prone to slide back into unbelief.

Perhaps the most difficult part of being a Christian is that we cannot force the Holy Spirit’s hand. We cannot command him to make someone believe. We cannot save the people we love—just as we cannot save *ourselves* or make *ourselves* believe God’s Word.

But we do know this: if there is to be any hope that we and the people we love will become or remain Christian, it will only be because they hear the Word of God and the Holy Spirit makes them believe that it’s true. This is how it works. Every single time.

This is both maddening and amazing at the same time. It’s maddening because it’s out of our control. All we can do is keep hearing and proclaiming the Word of God. But, like the women and the ten disciples, we cannot make anyone believe us when we tell them that Jesus is risen.

But this is also amazing because it is completely in God’s control. It is impossible for us to make even ourselves believe, but God shoves faith into arrogant unbelievers all the time. He changes their minds and their hearts. He makes the Gospel matter for them. This is no hard thing for our God.

# Conclusion

Dear friends in Christ, what does it take a person to become or remain a Christian? That person doesn’t get to decide! Jesus shows up, and he makes them believe. He sends his witnesses to proclaim his Word, and then he turns unbelievers into faithful Christians who proclaim, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus comes uninvited, and he remains a welcome guest. He did it for the women at the tomb. He did it for the disciples. He did it for Thomas. He did it for you. Thank the Lord that he doesn’t let every unbeliever shut him out.

And yet, some of them do shut him out. They reject God’s Word. They will not let him soften their hearts or change their minds. What hope is there for these people whom we love?

If there is to be any hope that we and the people we love will become or remain Christian, it will only be because they hear the Word of God and the Holy Spirit makes them believe that it’s true. This is how it works. Every single time.

Jesus actually works through his Word and Sacraments to make people Christian. He has conquered death, and he has conquered our unbelief. Thanks be to God! Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.