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The Third Sunday after Easter

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A THREE-FOLD PEACE (II)

Appearing to his disciples in the upper room after his resurrection, Jesus three times greeted them with the words "peace be unto you". In his first greeting, Jesus reveals himself to his disciples truly risen from the dead. What is revealed is the completeness of the redemption he has wrought. In the entirety of human nature, body and soul, he suffered the curse and condemnation of sin; in the entirety of human nature, body and soul, he offered himself to the Father in the perfect obedience of love; in the entirety of his human nature, body and soul, he is vindicated beyond all challenge in resurrection. Appearing in the glory of the "spiritual body", Christ reveals the peace he gives: the peace of a new life for the whole of human nature, the soul first and then the body, a new life no longer bound by the curse and condemnation of sin, but set free by the favour and blessing of God. Here is peace in its fullest sense – peace with God, peace with one another, peace with ourselves, the peace of man reconciled to God and justified from all his sins, the peace of a new creation fulfilled with his grace.

"Peace be unto you". Jesus greets his disciples once more; and announces their apostolic commission: "as my Father sent me, even so send I you." Through their mission, through the witness of the apostles who saw him risen from the dead, the peace which Jesus offers to them, will be offered to his disciples everywhere, and at every time (cf Matthew 28:19, 20; Luke 24:46-48). To demonstrate that his disciples are to carry out this mission not in their own strength, but "endued with power from on high" (Luke 24:49), Jesus then gave them a sign: he "breathed", and told them "receive ye the Holy Ghost", the life-giving "breath" (spiritus) of God. And to indicate the divine authority of their commission, he gave them the power of the keys: "whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained" (cf Matthew 16:19; 18:18).

There is nothing inconsequential, therefore, about the Church's mission to preach the gospel of peace, in the ministry of word and sacrament. By means of it Christ offers us his peace: the peace of sins remitted and forgiven, of sinners justified from their sins and reconciled to the Father, the peace of humanity set free from the curse and condemnation of sin to lives lives in the grace and favour of God. To hear and receive this word is to enter into that peace: to hear it and to respond to it with indifference or hostility is to reject that peace. Here and now, by our decisions to receive or reject this peace as it is

offered to us in word and sacrament, we forge an eternal destiny for ourselves: and we are fools, or more than fools, if we let present opportunities float away.

But is it really possible to know his resurrection, and the completeness of our redemption in him, as a fact? The disciples did not find it easy to do so. They were "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (Luke 24:25). It is Thomas who brings this difficulty into sharp focus. Absent from that first Easter night's gathering, he found himself unable to accept what he was told. "Except I shall see the print of the nails in his hands, and shall put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I will not believe". What Thomas declares is not a willful refusal to believe, but a confession of inability. For common sense and imagination alike cannot grasp the fact of resurrection, or the hope of redemption, or the divine gift offered in the word and sacraments of the church. All this lies outside our experience, and beyond the bounds of what we think we know is possible.

And therefore, eight days later – the first octave of Easter – Jesus appeared once more to the disciples, and a third time said, "Peace be unto you". And he offered Thomas the specific proof that he had demanded: "Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands, and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side, and be not faithless, but believing". (There is a wonderful picture of this scene by Caravaggio, in which Jesus gently guides the skeptical apostle's thick finger into the wound on his side, who with two other disciples peers intently with astonishment at the place his finger probes.) Confronted by Christ risen, Thomas passes in that moment from the depths of doubt to the heights of faith. Seeing Christ's risen humanity, he confessed his unseen divinity, saying to Jesus, "My Lord and my God".

Jesus does not rebuke Thomas for his inability to believe apart from physical evidence: instead, by appearing to him in the flesh, he cures his unbelief: "Thomas, because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed; blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed". Through the eyewitness testimony of Thomas and the other apostles, it will become possible for those who do not see also to believe, and through faith to grasp hold of the peace of redemption that is offered us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. St. John concludes his gospel, "these [signs done by Jesus] are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name."

There is only way Thomas or anyone else can grasp the fact of the resurrection, and the hope of redemption: and that is faith. It is faith which hears and receives the gift and promise of peace made possible by the power of the Almighty God, set forth in the preaching of the gospel by the Church, conveyed to us in the sacraments. It is faith alone which discerns in the outward washing of water the forgiveness of our sins and new birth as the children of God; it is faith alone which discerns in the bishop's laying on of hands the seven-fold gift of the Spirit to confirm and strengthen us in the new life of baptism; it is faith alone which perceives in bread and wine the body and blood of Christ to preserve our souls and bodies unto everlasting life. Through faith alone do we receive the life and peace and joy of our redemption in Christ.

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