

Text: 1 John 1:1-2:2, Acts 4:32-35 (John 20:19-31) ✝ Quasimodogeniti (2nd Sunday of Easter)

The Tie that Binds

In the name of him who was dead and now lives and reigns forever, dear friends in Christ: Last Sunday when we met for worship, we were blessed once again to celebrate the highest and happiest of the Church's holy days: the feast of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's the day the Church sets apart to commemorate the central truth of our faith: the fact of Jesus appearing again alive and well to his astonished disciples on the third day after having been brutally tortured, crucified, and laid dead in a borrowed tomb. It happened. And because it happened, we know that one day we too will rise. This is the significance of his resurrection to us. By his innocent suffering and death he defeated death for us. As I mentioned last week, death for us has become a toothless and clawless lion. Though it roar with fearsome sound, it cannot hold us. One day, at Christ's command, it must let us go. And on that day the dead in Christ will rise from their graves to new and glorious life, never to die again.

And what makes our resurrection possible – indeed, the thing that makes it *inevitable* – is the forgiveness of sins purchased for us by the suffering and death of Jesus. That's *why* he died: to pay our redemption price. The Law and Justice of God demand that the soul that sins must die. And when I say death in this context, I don't mean merely the temporary separation of the soul and body that occurs at physical death; no, I mean also the eternal death of being separated both body and soul from the holy presence of God and cast forever into the fires of hell. Jesus died to redeem us from both. And the way he did it was to accept the guilt of our sins on himself. He endured the infinite punishment we deserved. He was separated from his Holy Father for us. He died in our place. And by doing so he satisfied the righteous demands of the Law for us. This is how we are forgiven. This is what reconciles us to God. And this is what guarantees that we will one day arise from the sleep of death.

We wait for that day with eager expectation, looking forward to the restoration of all things and our eternal reunion with those we love who have died in the faith. But that's in the future at some undisclosed time. What I want to talk about is now. The day of our resurrection lies ahead; but the forgiveness of sins and our reconciliation with God that make our resurrection possible are present realities. We live in them now. And the Lord intends that we enjoy their benefits each and every day of our lives.

This is what we see revealed in this morning's Scripture readings. In the Gospel lesson, we find the disciples huddled together in fear behind locked doors. And from their perspective, they have good reasons to be afraid. They saw what the enemies of Jesus did to him, and they know that as his disciples, they too are now probably on the wanted list. They also know about the resurrection of Jesus at this point. He has appeared to Mary and to Peter and to the two Emmaus disciples. But they don't know what it means yet. And that's a problem. They all swore that they would stand with Jesus. Everyone of them said that they would gladly die defending him. But when their moment of testing came, they all failed. They couldn't even spend an hour in prayer with him before his ordeal began. When the guards came to arrest him, they all fled. In the shadows covertly watching his trial, Peter denied him three times. And they all watched anonymously and silent, hidden in the crowds, as he was beaten and crucified. They didn't even have the courage to claim the body of their Master for burial – that was left to others. And beyond all that, none of them believed him. He told them many times exactly what was going to happen. And he said that on the third day, he would rise from the dead. But when

the women came back from the tomb, saying it was empty and that angels declared to them that he was alive just as he had said, they told the women they were out of their minds.

Now they know better; or at least they think they do. They're not sure what to think. And so try to imagine what's going on in that locked room. There are enemies outside. We don't know who we can trust. And Jesus, if indeed he's alive, well, he can't be very happy with us. Can he? We lied to him. We betrayed him. We abandoned him. We doubted—*no, we refused to believe him*. And now it's pretty clear that he is who he said he was: the Christ, the Son of God. So it's not just some teacher we abandoned; we ran away from the Lord. We who saw his miracles and beheld his glory, betrayed the Author of life. That can't be good. We've proven ourselves to be unfit and unworthy. God will surely condemn us.

And so here they are, trembling in fear of both God and man; utterly convinced that if their enemies don't destroy them, the Lord will. And I have to believe that these fears are placing strains on their relationships with one another. It's not hard to imagine them all short-tempered, snapping and biting at each other, exchanging accusations, proposing ideas or courses of action only to have them shot down with bitter insults. They are all looking for a way out. They need to get away from this group, this city, maybe even the country; but how will they flee from the Lord? I suspect that's why Thomas is not with them on that first Easter eve. I'll bet that he's off planning his escape. But the rest are here. And they are terrified.

And then suddenly in this dark prison of doubt, despair, and discord Jesus appears. In Luke's account of the same event, it says the disciples were terrified when they first saw him, thinking that he was a ghost. But immediately Jesus declares to them God's peace. He shows them his hands that still bear the marks of the nails from which his body hung on the cross and his side scarred by the spear – the wound from which flowed the water and blood. Again he speaks to them God's peace. And in his physical presence and in his speaking, God's peace is delivered to them. They receive it. They experience it. They understand that they are forgiven, that the Lord holds nothing against them, and that they have been reconciled to God through the crucified and risen body of the Lord. The fear and guilt they knew only moments before evaporate. They're gone. This is something concrete. It's tangible. It's not just an abstract idea, not just a theological concept, not just a dead liturgical declaration. It's a physical and spiritual reality. The living, breathing, risen Lord Jesus bearing in his body the marks of his atoning sacrifice *is* the peace of God. In him all sins are forgiven. In him fellowship with God is restored.

John was one of the disciples present in that room. He experienced that peace and restored fellowship. It washed over him, set him free from fear from guilt and from shame, and it filled him with inexpressible joy. And this is what he is communicating to us in today's Epistle. He is, in effect, reliving that moment of restoration when he says, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of life ... which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ."

Understand what he's saying: "We have peace and fellowship with God in Christ Jesus through the forgiveness of sins, and we are now extending the same to you." And, of course, this was exactly what Jesus told them to do when he breathed on them, gave him his Holy Spirit, and commissioned to go forth declaring the forgiveness of sins in his name. And this work of restoring fellowship with God goes on today through the ministry of Christ's Church – again, in

very concrete and tangible ways: in the water of Baptism which unites us with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection, and washes away the stain of sin; in the words of Absolution through which Christ declares to you the forgiveness of your sins, and in the body and blood of the risen Lord Jesus that he gives you in his holy Supper so that you too can see, hear, touch, and even smell and taste that in Christ your sins are forgiven and your fellowship with God is restored.

What's more, it stays that way. In this fallen world while we still have a sinful nature one thing is for sure: we will continue to sin. Yes, we should try to avoid it. Yes, we should always attempt to do what's right. And yes, we should certainly not allow ourselves to fall into deliberate, ongoing, and unrepentant sin for there is grave temporal and eternal peril in doing so. But the good news is that God's forgiveness in Christ is not a one shot kind of thing; no, it's our ongoing, ever-present reality. As John says, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." He wants to do it. So you need never fear that somehow you might have gone too far, done something too terrible or despicable that he would turn you away or cast you out. It can't happen. Through the ongoing ministry of the Church Jesus stands ready at all times to declare to you the peace of God and the forgiveness of your sins. In Christ your fellowship with the Lord can be restored a thousand times a day; indeed, it need never end.

And there is an added benefit to all of this, which is just as important, but which is, unfortunately, often overlooked. It's this: having been restored to fellowship with God through the forgiveness of sins that Christ died to attain, we are also made in Christ to be in peace and fellowship with one another. How? Through precisely the same means: the forgiveness of sins. Just as our sins against God break our fellowship with him, so also our sins against each other are what upset, undermine, and destroy all of our human relationships. And just as the forgiveness of sins we have through faith in Christ is what grants peace and fellowship with God, so also the forgiveness we extend to each other for the sake of Christ is what restores peace and fellowship among us.

Forgiveness is, in fact, the glue that holds us together in the Church of Jesus Christ. Because this much is certain: we are sinners. And that means I am going to sin against you. And you are going to sin against me. And we're all going to be sinning against each other. You can count on it. It's going to happen. And for some reason it seems to be that it's the people we claim to love the most that we hurt the most by our sinning. And if we don't do anything about it, all this sinning will certainly tear us apart. It will lead to discord, bitterness, anger, hate filled words, and the desire for revenge.

But just as Christ showed his love for us chiefly by what he suffered to ensure that we would be forgiven, so also we show our love for one another primarily by forgiving each others' sins. We get a glimpse of this in today's first reading from the Book of Acts. It describes the wonderful harmony and fellowship enjoyed by the early Church in Jerusalem – how everyone was looking out for the welfare of the whole group, and no one was holding anything back. If there was a need, people with the means to help were happy to respond.

It struck me: over the course of world history there have been any number of attempts to recreate that kind of community. Some visionary will come along and get a bunch of people to sign on to become members of a communal society in which it's share and share alike: each one contributing according to his ability and providing to each one according to his need. These communities always fail – every time – without exception. Why? It's not because they don't mean well or have high ideals. It's not because they don't try. It's because they can't forgive

each other. There is always the perception (true or false) that some aren't contributing according to their ability; and there is always the perception (again, right or wrong) that others are taking more than what they really need. These in turn lead to suspicion, mistrust, resentment and ultimately to open division and strife. It seems, initially at least, that the early Church was able to overcome this. Let me suggest that it wasn't so much that those same perceptions weren't there – they were sinners too; but rather that they knew how to forgive each other when those perceptions arose. They would rather be taken advantage of and forgive than to allow sin to divide them and break their fellowship. And in this they were reflecting the love of Christ who allowed himself to be abused, humiliated, treated unjustly, and killed in order to restore our peace and fellowship with God through the forgiveness of our sins.

Dear friends, forgiveness is the tie that binds us together in the Church of Christ. It's what gives us peace and fellowship with God, and it's what makes possible our fellowship with each other. May God grant us the grace to forgive as we have been forgiven in Christ, that we may be of one heart and one soul, enjoying perfect peace and harmony through the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!