

John 20:19-31  
Second Sunday of Easter  
April 12, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld."*

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The very night following his glorious resurrection – lo and behold! - Jesus acts as though his resurrection actually means something, as if it has some “eternal life implications;” and He immediately begins pouring out divine gifts... divine gifts through His Word of promise, that Word of promise which – by the resurrection that very morning – is now and forevermore undeniably trustworthy.

As we heard last week, Jesus’ resurrection is vindication of all His promises. It means justification is true. It means unity with God is true. Thus, “peace be with you.” That’s no mere greeting. That’s the peace between God and man that has been sought since the Fall. That’s the unity and oneness between God and man that has now been accomplished through the cross.

And, if one with God because of the merit of Christ’s cross, then God’s gift to you as His beloved *is*: the Holy Spirit, that Holy Spirit whom Jesus breathes out onto His disciples to give life to the

Church and its new creation, much like life was first breathed into lifeless man in the old creation. And, much like the old, so in the New, the life and breath of the creation is the Holy Spirit “whom” (Peter says in our first reading) “God has given”... given to you in Holy Baptism when you were born anew of water and the Spirit.

And, it’s no coincidence that the baptismal life in the Spirit is a life in which justification pours out to you individually in the forgiveness of sins. Justification and forgiveness are completely synonymous, aren’t they? To speak of justification *won* by Christ’s merit and cross is to also speak of forgiveness *applied* by Christ’s authority and gifts. And to proclaim forgiveness to you personally is to also proclaim the universal truth that Christ died for all – His merit justified all – that whoever hopes *in Christ* (the faith given by the gift of the Holy Spirit) is shielded by *Christ’s* righteousness and thus, stands justified before God.

Thus, justification, Baptism, the Holy Spirit, and the forgiving of the individual’s sins all stand together in the trustworthiness of Christ’s resurrection, don’t they? To rejoice in the vindication of one promise is to have reason to rejoice in the vindication of all promises. And to be hardened toward one leads to a hardening toward all. And thus, to harden one’s heart toward the resurrection is to harden one’s heart toward all that flows from it – the Holy Spirit, Baptism, forgiveness, justification.

And that's where Doubting Thomas comes in, isn't it? In fact, to label Thomas as "doubting" is actually quite generous. For, Thomas isn't doubting; his heart isn't fluttering in uncertainties... his heart is hard as a rock... bitter in his grief! – "Unless I place my hand in his side, I will *never* believe!" The Greek for "never" is *οὐ μὴ* – a double-negative, a powerfully certain "no," a "surely not!"

In short, to call Thomas 'doubting' is awfully generous – He was bitter! And, where Thomas was hardened toward the resurrection of Jesus, what else had he hardened his heart toward? – the forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit, justification in Jesus.

What a sobering caution that is for us! I cannot claim I rejoice in the forgiveness of sins if I don't believe Jesus rose from the dead, for the forgiveness of sins directly depends upon him rising from the dead! Conversely, I cannot claim I rejoice that Jesus rose from the dead then have no use for the forgiveness of sins! For, how can I be hardened toward the forgiveness of sins if I acknowledge Jesus rose from the dead, when the divine life of the forgiveness of sins is the very spoils of the victory he brought with him when He rose from the dead? Did you notice that in our First Reading, how Peter says, "God exalted [Jesus] at his right hand as Leader and Savior *to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*" That was the whole purpose of His death and resurrection! That life in the forgiveness of sins is the whole Way ("I am the Way") by which the justification of the cross becomes ours!

And yet, do we rightly take comfort in repentance and forgiveness, or do we doubt it... either by not trusting it (“C’mon! This is the real world! What’s *that* going to accomplish!”) or even by being offended by it, as if the gift of the Holy Spirit was meant to make us super-Christians rather than make us forgiven Christians, as if to justify us by our *own* merit – *beyond* the need for repentance and forgiveness – rather than to justify us by Jesus’ merit, *through* the baptismal life of repentance and forgiveness.

And, in that way, we sometimes exhibit the Thomas-like heart, when we say, “Yeah, Jesus rose from the dead... fine, but I don’t see that changing my confidence in God or how Christians live toward one another!”

But, the resurrection changed everything! And the apostles were eyewitnesses to it and “so is the Holy Spirit,” Peter says in our First Reading... “the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.”

That’s an interesting word choice: to ‘obey’ God – wouldn’t that imply that you don’t need repentance and forgiveness if you just perfectly obey? No, actually to obey God is grounded in humbling yourself before His mighty hand and knowing that He will exalt you precisely through the One He has “exalted to his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance and the forgiveness of sins.”

And for that great purpose, for that great benefit, and in His great mercy, “He has caused us to be born again,” the same Peter

writes in his epistle... God “has caused us to be born again” – there’s baptism talk, isn’t it? – born again in water, born from above because that water is joined to and filled with *the Holy Spirit*. And, what does that “water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us”... what does that baptism grant us? – “a living hope.” Not a Thomas-like cynicism. Not a hardened heart that Jesus isn’t actually raised and its all just spiritual ideas... or even that ‘he *is* raised, but who cares, it doesn’t make a difference and no one really believes in repentance and forgiveness anyway.’ No, we are born to a living hope!

Why is this hope a *living* hope... so powerfully confident, so certain? – because it is a living hope “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”, Peter says. Yes, everything hinges upon and changes with the good news of the resurrection. Once it is no longer a mere spiritual concept, but a historical truth embodied in the risen Jesus, everything changes; hope is certain. And that living hope will result in “an inheritance” (again, baptismal language – inheritance is adoption’s great everlasting benefit, sealed by the death of the testator)... “an *inheritance* that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God’s power are being guarded through faith.”

Whoa! Go back to that last clause – how are *you* described? – “you, who *by God’s power* are being guarded through faith.” What does that power of God that guards us, what does that look like? Do

we reason, “I’ve heard I’m gifted the Holy Spirit, eyewitness of Jesus’ resurrection! If I have the Spirit, I must be invincible!” No, that’s not the power of God, nor the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather, what is the guarding of faith by the power of God and the working of the Holy Spirit? How does Jesus say it? – “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven; if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.”

There it is – the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, all found in the humble-sounding life of repentance and forgiveness. The life of repentance and forgiveness guards you, guards you against Thomas-like cynicism. Humble-sounding? Yes. But, **the power of God**. Isn’t this exactly what the religious leaders argued? – “No one can forgive sins but God alone!” True. So, God alone, God in the flesh, the God-man risen from the dead and having all authority in heaven and on earth, breathes on his disciples, “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whoever’s sins you forgive, they are forgiven.”

Yes, in that humble life of repentance and forgiveness, there is divine power at work. How does the absolution say it? – “by the command / (authority) of my Lord Jesus Christ, I forgive you your sins.” Or, as the Rite for Private Confession and Absolution asks the penitent: “Do you believe that my forgiveness is *God’s* forgiveness?” Yes, the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes. Isn’t that how Paul described the Gospel? – “I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation for everyone

who believes” – but that Gospel is not just the *record* of Jesus’ death and resurrection, but also the outpouring of it: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven.”

This is how God guards your faith, just as Peter says, “you... who by God’s power are being guarded through faith.” *Through* faith because faith clings to the promise of God’s power at work.

Indeed, God guards you from Thomas-like cynicism by giving faith the forgiveness to hold on to – “I am at peace with God! I have been baptized into Christ’s death, that that meritorious death would cleanse my sins with the blood of Jesus, would wash me clean in Holy Baptism, and will raise me up in Christ’s resurrection when He comes again in glory.” Yes, that humble faith may cling to and is guarded by that humble life of repentance and forgiveness, the power of God at work in the Holy Spirit gifted by the risen Jesus.

Now, that all sounds great until Jesus speaks his last phrase, “if you withhold forgiveness from anyone, it is withheld.” This lands with a thud upon our heart and we say, “This is harder to believe than the resurrection! – that God would give such power to men? With Thomas, I will never believe!”

But Christ does not give His sent ones such authority that they may play lord over your soul, but that you may be “*guarded* through faith.” The withholding of forgiveness is not to punish, but to awaken... not to condemn, but to call out of darkness... not to

oppose you, but to warn – as our first reading says – “you might be found opposing God!”

The Scriptures speak often about this loving call to repentance – forgiveness not being showered upon the hard-hearted. If you read *Calvary at Daily Prayer* with us, you may have read those words to the Hebrews just this past week, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he *loves!*”

What love is ours; thus what joy is ours – that the resurrected Jesus would, as the wisdom and power of God, lead us into and gift us the baptismal life of repentance and forgiveness!

Indeed, Peter says in that First Reading that the resurrected Jesus is exalted to the right hand “as Leader and Savior *to give repentance*” ... notice that? – Jesus’ work includes melting our Thomas-hearts of stone and *giving* us repentance. So long as our heart is hardened, what good is forgiveness? Such word to the proud and self-righteous – “I forgive you” – is met with scoffing and disinterest – “Who are you to forgive me? Who are you to claim I need forgiveness? I will never believe this is the work of a risen Jesus!” Okay, Thomas, settle down.

But Jesus was raised to be Leader and Savior to give repentance that leads to the forgiveness of sins. *There* is his joy... *there* is the great fruit of His passion and sacrifice. *There* is your clear conscience, that you are *not* found opposing God, but are found *one*

with God, blessed by God, a baptized heir of God, even *guarded* by God... guarded not only from sin, death, and the power of the devil, but guarded from our own Thomas-like cynicism... that Jesus' gift of the Holy Spirit, His work to give you repentance and lead you to forgiveness... it would all lead you away from the stubbornness that says "I will never believe" and to the tearful joy of crying, "My Lord and My God!"

That's *your* joy, Christian! That's the joy you have been caused to be born into – a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus... that's your joy to live in in the baptismal life of repentance and forgiveness, to share in with your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, to believe in, that you may have life in his name and, one day, share bodily in the glory of His resurrection.

In the Name of the Father  
And of the Son  
And of the Holy Spirit.  
+ AMEN +

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