Easter 3, April 26: Luke 24:13–35

Other Lessons:

The season of Easter is period of 7 weeks that looks at the meaning and effects of the resurrection of Jesus. This event, the death and rising of Jesus from the dead forever is too significant for the entire church to only celebrate for one or two weeks. The Sundays that follow Easter focuses on some of Jesus’ teachings, though these happened before Good Friday, those promises are only fulfilled and applied to us after the resurrection. And especially the 2nd and 3rd Sunday after Easter (last week and today) where we see the direct aftermath and subsequent appearances of Jesus to his disciples.

Last week we saw the struggle of faith in Thomas as he demanded that unless he “sees” evidence of the mark of the nails in the hands and the pierced side, he will never believe. As I said last week, the peace that Christ gives is purchased by his blood on the cross and is offered and given through the word spoken through his representatives, all these are valid, but without faith, without believing these things as “for you”, none of these will benefit you. And Thomas was chided by Jesus on the 2nd Sunday of Easter for believing by sight. But it must be noted that Jesus is NOT saying that one is more blessed just by believing or having faith out of nothing. When Jesus says “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (Jn20:29), he means that the blessing is for those who believe by hearing (instead of by sight). And it was not just Thomas, the other disciples too did not believe in the words of Jesus when he said that he would rise on the 3rd day, nor did they believe the women when they told them about the events at the tomb. And two of those disciples who heard are now on the road to Emmaus, presumably to be going back home as there is nothing left for them to do in Jerusalem. The exact location of this village is still unknown, some maps will show that it’s west of Jerusalem, while some will show that it’s north of Jerusalem. It’s about a 2 hour walk from Jerusalem and these 2 disciples, Cleopas and his companion, were going there on this Easter afternoon.

Indeed what else is there to do? The Passover is completed and their master, their great teacher and prophet is dead. It was a great tragedy leaving them with grief and disappointment. So much so that when this stranger approached them and asked them about what they were discussing, they “stood grim-faced”. By the power of God, these 2 were not able to recognize Jesus, but they too, like Thomas, were blinded with a different kind of darkness that is not from God, but from their own unbelief. In their lack of faith, Jesus was hidden, and yet Jesus in his hiddenness comes to them so that they might believe and see (not see and then believe like Thomas). We are not trying to pick on Thomas, but these are written so that we might learn and believe, as John told us in last week’s Gospel.

You can see the irony in their response to this supposedly “visitor”. First they were “shocked” not by the presence of Jesus, but by the fact that this “visitor” did not know anything about the what happened on Good Friday, when in fact this man was at the very center of it all! The second irony is that they rightly called Jesus a “visitor/stranger/sojourner”, though not to Jerusalem, but to the entire earth as his home is above. And the last irony is that they had “hoped” (notice they use the word “hope” (past tense no less!) and not “believe”) that this Jesus would “redeem” Israel and now they are disappointed that he was crucified, when in fact that crucifixion was the very redemption of the whole world.

It seems that the problem with these 2 disciples (and possibly with the others as well) was that they did not believe in the resurrection. They may still hold on to the Jewish tradition that the soul is permanently separated from the body after 3 days. And now it has been 3 days and still no sign of Jesus, except that the body is gone. So either someone stole the body as the soldiers are reporting (after being paid handsomely) or that perhaps God has taken this Jesus up as he did with the prophet Elijah. Not only did they not believe that Jesus could and would rise again, but they also did not believe that this was absolutely necessary for the work of redemption, that the death AND the resurrection are both necessary to obtain the forgiveness of sins, for the salvation of the whole world.

And here let us not think that this does not concern us or that it’s not a problem for us since we all believe in the resurrection and we all believe that it was for our salvation. For the problem is the danger of a false faith, not in the absence or lack of faith. It’s not that these 2 disciples or Thomas or any of the other disciples had no faith at all, they did believe in something, but the question is “what do they actually believe?” For these 2 on the road, they believed that Jesus was a great prophet from God, which is correct, but they believed that his task was to save Israel from the Romans, to restore the kingdom (which they actually asked on Ascension day, see Acts 1:6). Indirectly then, their response also showed that their greatest enemy, the greatest problem in their lives was not sin and death and the devil, but the Romans and the Roman occupation. And this hope was shattered when Jesus showed to be a helpless man, crucified and hanging dead on the cross.

But what about us? Do we also have wrong faith and hope in something that God did not actually promise? Have we become like the rest of the world with the idea that we are “spiritual” and therefore we can neglect the commandments of God? Do we still see sin, our sinful and dying flesh, the temptations of the world and the devil as our chief problem? Do we see repentance as an important aspect of our daily living, along with prayer and the study of God’s word? When this pandemic is over, will we still see church life, the word and sacrament as important, or will we be accustomed to not having to physically go to church and gather with fellow brothers and sisters? (I hope nobody will come to church in their pajamas :) We will be like these 2 disciples who saw nothing left in Jerusalem and depart and descend with great disappointment and sadness?

They left the city but this visitor from heaven comes to them, the one who redeems not only Israel, but the whole world, the great prophet and the son of God comes to these men. Yet Jesus did not reveal himself to them, why? Wouldn’t it have solved all their problems if he just showed who he was? Indeed, he came for the purpose of bringing these 2 disciples back so that they would join with the others in Jerusalem and receive what we saw in last week’s story in John 20, the sharing of the Holy Spirit and the commission to forgive and retain sins (quite similar to Moses appointing Elders in Num11). But this bringing back was achieved not through sight, but through the word of God.

The word of God, as mentioned many times already, is not just information, but it does what it says and promises. It opens eyes and hearts by giving the true and saving faith. That’s why Jesus spent that time explaining everything from the Old Testament, that all the prophesies pointed to the “divine necessity” of Christ’s death AND resurrection. The Christ must die because this was for the sins of the whole world. The Christ must also rise again so that people will believe and have eternal life through and in that new undying life in Christ. And this same living son of God still comes to us today through his word and sacraments. He sends preachers to preach and teach so that we too may have that right faith and so have life eternal. For the path is narrow, many have fallen to the right and to the left. But we can have certainty and assurance when Christ who is preached in your ears is the one who died and rose again for the forgiveness of sins. The Christ who will establish an earthly kingdom, the Christ who gives you a comfortably life, the Christ who doesn’t really demand repentance, the Christ who doesn’t really care about good works, the Christ of your own imagination sounds very nice and compelling, but will only bring much disappointment and sadness like these 2 disciples, and will only lead down the path of hell and destruction.

So let the word of God, let the Christ who died and rose for your sins bring you faith, so that you are brought back, like those 2, with a burning heart of faith. The word of God does that. It rekindles faith and brings us on the right path. That word stirs the hear, especially when the Gospel enlightens and enlivens us to be in Christ. This is the new life, not that it’s a “feeling” or “emotion” per se, but it is something that you know when you have it. So let this word of God dwell in us richly. For those of us who have more free time at home, use it to read the bible. Although I should caution against reading random stuff on the internet. A couple weeks ago we sent a newsletter, prepared by our Elder Phil, which contains many useful information and resources for devotion and study of the word of God. Use them. They are there for your good. And if you no access to the internet, I can recommend books for you to read. And continue to pray for one another, for the church, and for the whole world, that the word of God will be established forever. The word of God endures forever. Everything else will fade and be gone, but the word of God endures/remains forever. So let us hold fast to this word until the end.