

## ***“Permission Giving”***

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 12, 2015

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Theme: Jesus gives us permission to approach the Holy from wherever we are in our spiritual journey; we are to allow others to have the same spiritual latitude.

**Scriptures: John 20: 19-31 Acts 4: 32-37**

### **John 20: 19-31**

<sup>19</sup> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” <sup>22</sup> When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

<sup>24</sup> But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

<sup>26</sup> A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not

doubt but believe.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”

<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup> But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

### **Acts 4:32-37**

<sup>32</sup> Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. <sup>33</sup> With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. <sup>34</sup> There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. <sup>35</sup> They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

<sup>36</sup> There was a Levite, a native of Cyprus, Joseph, to whom the apostles gave the name Barnabas (which means “son of encouragement”). <sup>37</sup> He sold a field that belonged to him, then brought the money, and laid it at the apostles’ feet.

***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”***

Now that is a loving Word from Jesus for those who have not seen and yet believe.

You are blessed in your ongoing, giving, living faith in God even if you have not seen.

Here also is a gracious word of permission  
to doubt, to think, to question, and to sit with those  
who do.

Here you shall receive permission for others to sit with you  
when your doubts rise to the surface or your faith  
waned.

Heretofore you have permission to come to Jesus just as you  
are.

Permission is granted to serve the Lord as a spiritual conduit  
for neighbors and family members to be and do the  
same.

***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet  
believe.”***

Jesus called people to His side.

He called forth a wide assortment of people whom he  
encountered;

around a dozen chose to be His disciples.

He invited them to follow the Way and ways of God.

He blessed, empowered and encouraged them,  
and even when disappointment and death and  
destruction

raised their ugly heads,

still Jesus reached out to the disciples  
and engaged them

to be active partners in ministries  
of grace.

Immediately after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus  
into life everlasting,

their sacred partnership hit a crisis.

A delightful myth is told of what happened in heaven after the resurrection.

We see Jesus and the angels looking down at earth.

They saw the disciples scattering and going back to what they had been doing

before they met Jesus.

The angels were aghast, and asked Jesus, "*What happens now? What is your Plan B?*"

Jesus laughed and said, "*There is no Plan B. They are my plan!*"

*Together we can work it out.*"

You see, my friends, disciples of Jesus Christ are God's plan for redemption.

So further work out the details and lay the groundwork,

Jesus returned to earth to reconnect and resurrect the partnership.

We read in John 20 that Thomas the Twin was with the disciples,

hiding from the authorities after the crucifixion.

They had seen Jesus die on the cross.

Even though they had heard stories that he had risen from the dead;

they were not sure which way was up.

In John 20 we find the disciples of Jesus

were "in the house with the doors shut...and Jesus came in."

They were afraid.

The point here is not their fear of the Jewish authorities

but that the doors were shut and Jesus Christ came in.

There is nowhere you can go or be or shut yourself in that Jesus Christ cannot enter.

You may be lonely or afraid, in prison or in a hospital,  
in an isolated country home or in a city of several  
million,

and Jesus Christ will enter in and say to you,  
*“Shalom. Peace be with you.”*

In fact, Jesus is saying this to us all the time.

Wherever you are, whenever you can,

open your ears and your heart and you will hear the  
Living Christ say unto you,

*“Shalom. Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit.”*

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was not with [the disciples] when Jesus came.

<sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, *“We have seen the Lord.”*  
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and said, *“Peace be with you.”*

<sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, *“Put your finger here and see my  
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*Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but  
believe.”*

<sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, *“My Lord and my God!”*

<sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, *“Have you believed because you have  
seen me?*

*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to  
believe.”*

***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet***

***believe.”***

Over the centuries the Church of Jesus Christ has been hard on Thomas.

Thomas the Twin has been given the unfortunate nickname of Doubting Thomas.

Sometimes when someone is unsure of spiritual convictions and raises doubts aloud,

he or she might be called Thomas.

Rather than being harsh on Thomas the Twin for doubting and then believing,

we could instead celebrate his spiritual honesty,

emulate the authenticity of his questions;

and dare to identify the common ground

we've shared with him

at various points in our lives.

Frederick Buechner writes:

*“Whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God,*

*if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.*

*Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.”*[\[1\]](#)

Our prayer – and God answers prayers, and seeking hearts, and knocks on doors –

our prayer is for this sanctuary to be host and home and hospitable

for people who doubt and believe,

who question and wonder,

who seek the One they are not at

all convinced exists,

and knock at the very door

that terrifies them.

And believe you me, church can be a very scary place.  
One Sunday morning a gentlemen walked three times  
around this physical plant  
in order to generate the courage he needed to walk in.  
He was so nervous that morning he had a black shoe and a  
brown shoe.  
Praise God that he was so well received that he came back  
again and again,  
and in time grew to become a servant leader.

Jesus responds to Thomas and speaks to the disciples then  
and today, saying,  
***“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet  
believe.”***

Blessed are YOU who have not seen the risen Christ and yet  
you know Him.  
Blessed are you who are water-washed and Spirit-born.  
Blessed are you who confess your sins and are born again,  
and again, and again.  
Blessed are you who are considering and contemplating  
becoming washed anew by the loving power of the  
Spirit of God.  
May God lead you and listen to your innermost questions  
and doubts and faith.  
May you speak aloud your own confession  
as Thomas did when he said, *“My Lord and my God!”*

The Church is commissioned to bring people to Christ.  
May we leave behind the lonely days of pole fishing  
and welcome the fun of casting our nets far and wide.  
However, let's leave the cleaning of the catch to Christ.  
He is so much more adept!  
And let's relieve one another of the pressure  
to convince or persuade anyone else from disbelief

into believing what you have experienced of the  
grace of God.

William Willimon says,

“I do not think our job is to argue disbelieving people into  
belief in resurrection.

I think we have got to live lives of discipleship

that make no sense if Jesus had not been raised from  
the dead.

There is no absolute, irrefutable, unassailable “proof” of  
resurrection.

Even after the resurrection some of Jesus’ own  
disciples doubt.

Jesus does not trouble them or himself about their  
doubts. [Should we?]

Rather Jesus turns to them and commands them:

*‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.’*

Then Jesus sends out his disciples to the far corners of the  
earth,

not with arguments about the truth,

not with proofs and evidence of a bodily  
resurrection,

but rather as those whose presence, whose actions,

whose love, whose speech, whose kindness and care,

whose being and sharing of the Good News

is the only “proof” of the

resurrection.”[\[2\]](#)

The Church of Jesus Christ hereby grants you permission to  
be living proof

– the only living proof – of the resurrection of Jesus  
Christ

from the dead into life everlasting.

By your love, by your kindness and care, by your striving for  
justice and mercy

the world around you will know not only that we are



Christians by our love,  
the world will know that Jesus lives.  
May our lives resonate and reverberate with the classic  
hymn,

“He lives! He lives in you and me.”

***Permission is given to the blessed who have not  
seen and yet believe.***

One of the gifts of the Spirit is the gift of understanding,  
which fosters and builds community.

The more we work and play at building community, at  
*Koinonia*, at fellowship,

the more we discover what we share in common.

The messages of the Spirit is given to the whole people of  
God.

“The Spirit does not speak a different message

for each spiritual seeker – *you find your truth and I’ll  
find mine.*

A quest for spiritual truth that would isolate us from our  
neighbors

is flawed at the outset.

The miraculous gift of [the church] resides in our discovering  
our commonality.”[\[3\]](#)

When a disciple of Jesus Christ named Barbara Johnson  
found out that she had cancer,

Barbara took it upon herself to share in her  
church

and with friends in other congregations

her painful struggles and small  
victories.

Barbara’s openness and authenticity and humor

in the face of human frailty and brokenness

gave other’s permission to be open with their  
own lives,

their faith, doubts, joys, suffering,  
shared need for community.  
She got cards and calls from people with similar concerns,  
people seeking out a neighbor to share their stories.

One woman wrote that while she was recovering from cancer  
she wore a wig.

She was with her 4-year-old grandson one day  
when her scalp started itching...beneath the wig.  
*"This thing is driving me crazy,"* she said,  
so she reached up and yanked off the wig.

The little boy exclaimed, *"Wow, Grandma, you've got trick  
hair!"*

Another friend wrote Barbara to say that  
while she was in her bathroom putting in her contact  
lenses,

she saw her prosthesis lying on the counter  
and her wig soaking in the sink.  
She thought, *"This isn't a bathroom. It's a used parts  
department!"*

Her thoughts may be applied to the church of Jesus Christ.  
We are not a museum for saints; we're a used parts  
department.

We gather together to sing the Lord's blessings;  
some believe, some doubt, some wrestle,  
some testify 'My Lord and My God'  
and sometimes we are all of the above or  
none at all.

We've got people who have been used and abused and  
misused.

We're inclusive of some folks who feel all used up and  
burned out,  
neglected, rejected and dejected.

Many of our used parts have found new usefulness  
in areas and ways they never imagined,  
and in the process have discovered deep joy  
and new meaning.

We don't call ourselves used anymore; we're *Pre-Owned*.

If you get up real close these used parts they might not look  
like much.

We may be dinged up, with scars and disappointments and  
tender spots.

We are not shiny or fancy;

authentic living has honed our sharp corners.

Serving Jesus in the community

has smoothed the rough patches.

Let me invite you to take a few steps back to look at the  
overall effect,

at the collective beauty and ministry of these used  
parts.

Then step in and step up and look closely at Jesus' Plan A.

You will witness and can testify to

the whole people of God giving one another  
permission

to grow spiritually, each at our own pace,

in safe space,

in a sacred space,

here where the resurrecting love of Jesus is  
reflected on every face.

*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy  
Spirit. Amen!*