THE TRANSFORMING EFFECT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

1. On his disciples in general
2. On one disciple in particular
3. On us, his disciples today

Butterflies are often used as Easter décor. That is not by coincidence, but by design. You see a long time ago the butterfly was appropriated by Christians as a natural symbol of Easter. The connection is this: just as a butterfly bursts forth into new life from the confinement of its tomb-like cocoon, so the Living Christ burst forth from the confinement of his tomb on Easter Sunday. The butterfly symbolizes the great transformation and change that the resurrection brought about.

Our text does not mention butterflies, but it does continue the Easter theme of change and transformation. In it, we clearly see: THE TRANSFORMING EFFECT OF THE RISEN CHRIST - on his disciples in general, and on one disciple in particular, and on us, his disciples today.

Our text begins: On the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, Peace be with you! After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. The time is Easter Sunday evening. That the disciples were together is easy to understand. They had been through a lot, both as individuals and as a group, and they needed each other's strength.

Imagine being there. Good Friday was still fresh on their minds. They were probably now just beginning to process what had happened. A week earlier, on Palm Sunday, Jesus' popularity seemed to be at an all time high. Then came a whirlwind of events and by week's end their Leader, their Master, and their Best Friend was gone. Many of the disciples were fisherman. They must have felt they were suddenly on a rudderless ship.

Then, as if this was not enough to deal with, reports had filtered back to them of an empty tomb. On top of that, people whom they knew and trusted claimed they had actually seen the Risen Christ. Now, more than ever, they needed each other. So those who had scattered in all directions after Jesus' arrest late Maundy Thursday seek each other out.

We are told they were together behind locked doors because of their fear of the Jews. Besides being confused, they were scared. Again, not hard to understand. They probably reasoned that what happened to Jesus could also happen to them, his followers. So they took what must have seemed to be the only precautionary measure open to them - they locked the doors.

All in all, a rather sad, dark and foreboding scene. But that was about to change. Because our text reports that suddenly Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, Peace be with you!

Again, try to imagine what your initial thought would have been had you been a disciple in that room. Probably something ranging from the question Could it really be him? to the insistence that It can't be him because he is dead and I saw it with my own eyes. Anticipating this kind of wonderment, Jesus showed them his hands and side. He gave them the assurance that yes, it was him; Yes, the reports they had heard about a resurrection were true. And their response? The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

Let's pause at this point and make some observations. Our text can be summarized in one brief sentence: The Risen Christ brings peace and joy. When Jesus appeared and said Peace be with you, it was more than a greeting. It was a declaration and also a gift, because
Jesus provides what the word says: Peace.

The peace we are talking about is more than just a feeling, although that is there as well. It is a reality. In other words, peace is first and foremost a state of being. Those who know and believe Jesus Christ live in a condition of peace with God. All anger, dissatisfaction and righteous indignation that God once had toward us and our sin has been taken away. Jesus bridged the gap that sin put between us and God. Jesus smoothed over the rocky relationship that had existed between sinners and a just God.

He did that by becoming one of us and then taking our place. First, by doing perfectly as our substitute what God asks us to do. After that, by suffering the punishment we as sinners deserve.

Here is the heavenly equation: We committed the crime, Jesus did the time, and God gives the credit of Jesus’ work to all who look to him as Savior. And the fact that he rose from the dead is the proof that he is indeed the Savior he claimed to be. Now we are at peace with God.

That true condition of peace naturally leads to a feeling of peace. The child of God has an inner peace. It is the tranquility and serenity of knowing that the Risen Lord is watching over our lives. It is the warm confidence of knowing that because the big eternal things like forgiveness and salvation have been taken care of, all the comparatively small and temporal things in life will be as well.

And the wonderful by-product of peace is joy. Specifically, the joy of knowing: He lives to silence all my fears;/he lives to wipe away my tears/he lives to calm my troubled heart;/ he lives all blessings to impart.

Yes, the Risen Christ brings us peace and joy.

Returning to our text, we now turn from the transforming effect the Risen Christ had on his disciples in general to the account of one disciple in particular, Thomas. We do not know why Thomas was not with the other disciples that first Easter evening.

When Thomas did return, he obviously found the disciples in better spirits than when he had left them. And although they recounted the event they had just experienced with great animation and happiness, Thomas was unimpressed. He told them: Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, and put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe. These are the words of a skeptic. Thus forever the name: Doubting Thomas.

Well, if proof is what Thomas wanted, proof is what he got: After 8 days, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them. Peace be with you, he said. Then he said to Thomas, Put your finger here and look at my hands. Take your hand and put it into my side. Do not continue to doubt, but believe. Thomas answered him, my Lord and my God!

A transformation before our very eyes - Thomas the doubter became Thomas the confessor. That was the effect the Risen Christ had on him. and it was not just some kind of momentary, feel-good, encounter with Christ. This was the real, long-lasting deal. Tradition and church history tell us that Thomas later went to present-day India where he preached and taught the good news of Christ until he met a martyr’s death there. He spent his life for the Risen Christ.

The Risen Christ had the same transforming effect on all the other disciples in that locked room as well, for all the original disciples there that night remained faithful to the end, serving in different mission fields, and all of them, with the exception of John (who suffered in other ways), died for the cause of Christ. The resurrection transformed them from scared men hiding behind locked doors to bold proclaimers of the Risen Lord they had seen.
And so it is with each of us. How can we not be changed when we consider the resurrection? When we ponder the Risen Christ and all that Easter means, how can we not be a little happier? How can we not feel closer to the Lord who has done so much for us? How can we not want to live more for him and less for ourselves? How can we not be strengthened and filled with peace and look upon life a little differently when we say: I know that my Redeemer lives?

Indeed, the Risen Christ changes lives. He changed the lives of his disciples. He changed the life of Thomas. He changes ours as well.

And to know and feel the full impact of this transforming power we must take to heart the words Jesus spoke to Thomas: Do not continue to doubt, but believe! These are words which we very well may need to repeat to ourselves several times a day: Do not continue to doubt, but believe!

What should we stop doubting? That God is in control. Or that he will take care of us. Or that he will provide for us. Or that he will never forsake us. Or that everything he does is out of love and according to the big picture of what is truly best for us. Or that he will keep all his promises. Or that he has forgiven us all our sins (including those we’re having a hard time forgiving ourselves). Or that he knows what he is doing, even in the unexplainable things in life.

Sometimes we forget these things. Then we worry. and the peace and joy we have talked about ebbs away.

But Jesus says to us in every area of our life: Do not continue to doubt, but believe. For he is risen and lives for you. As the hymn puts it: He lives to silence all my fears; he lives to wipe away my tears./ he lives to calm my troubled heart; he lives all blessings to impart. Yes, he lives to transform your life from doubt to confidence; from fear to victory. Trust him!

During World War 2 an English woman was asked how she slept so soundly through those terrible nights when German planes were bombing her city. This was her explanation: The good Lord promised that he would watch over us, and I trust him. There is no sense in two of us staying awake at night. Such is the transforming effect the Risen Christ has on the believer.

Transformation is what the Risen Christ is all about. He changes lives and calms hearts. He provides peace and creates joy. And we are the direct beneficiaries of all the changes he brings about.

May the blessings of the resurrection continue to comfort, strengthen and uplift us. These blessings are and always will be ours for as long as we, like the transformed disciples and transformed Thomas, Do not continue to doubt, but believe that he is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.

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