

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen. Alleluia.*

The testimony of the Gospels is, of course, that Jesus is Lord. And, as John's Gospel tells us, such testimonies were 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.' That 'life', by the way, is not just the biological functions of a surviving organism, but is translated here from the Greek word *zoe*, which is 'life of the ages', or eternal, significant life. But the Gospel message isn't just about the signs and wonders of Jesus, its narratives inform us, too, about the disciples, the apostles, and how they were drawn to Jesus, how they questioned, how they were puzzled, how they were challenged, how they learned and grew, and how they were transformed from a rag-tag sampling of ordinary people into courageous and world-changing leaders, as Jesus had intended.

For the apostles, the men and women who had been closest to Jesus for some years, his death was a monstrous shock. It came suddenly and in an unbelievable way. And it's not as if Jesus were elderly, an aging teacher who had years of faithful service and passed on at a ripe old age. He was in his early thirties, with many productive years ahead of him. And he hadn't been some ordinary, forgettable person either. He had been larger than life, humble yet compelling, soft-spoken yet inspirational, peaceful yet persistent. His sudden absence, as we all can testify, was disorienting and alarming. Who could ever have imagined?! What do we do now (?!), the apostles must have wondered. And it's all well and good that we are huddled here together in hiding, but what about me (?!) each must have been thinking. The authorities are probably right now looking to arrest me, and I'm embarrassed, too, that I left Jesus literally hanging out on a limb while I went away and hid at the first sign of trouble! Jesus kept hinting that he would return no matter what, and now the women say they have found the tomb empty! What if Jesus isn't really dead? How would I answer to him for my cowardice and infidelity?! What a weekend!

And what do I do now? Here it is the first day of the week, and I am now unemployed, I have no paying occupation anymore to support my family. I don't know where my next meal is coming from. I have devoted my life to learning and to serving the Master, but suddenly that's all gone. Woe is me! Each of the apostles, disoriented as they must have been, likely were becoming obsessed with their own drama. And that personal drama was laced with hopelessness, fear, and above all else, heartache. They were heartbroken. And suddenly, unexpectedly, miraculously Jesus is present with them. And the first thing he says to them is 'Peace be with you'. In fact, he repeats it as if wanting to be sure that they have indeed heard. And they rejoiced. The presence of the Lord is cause for rejoicing. And, believe it or not neither a big heavy stone nor a locked door could keep Jesus' presence from them. And that reassuring presence is enough to set their personal dramas aside. Somehow, that presence

brought each of them a sense of *zoe*, of significant life beyond their personal issues and anxieties, a spirit of connection greater than themselves and their current drama.

As you know, I had to have surgery last month, which was, for me, a big deal. But many of you in this community have had far more complicated health issues than I, and I felt almost embarrassed to have been such a center of attention during my recovery. But, in a way, my experience these last weeks has been instructive. Maybe I can empathize a bit better now with the issues you have been having, and for that I am grateful. I am also grateful for your prayer intentions, for the prayer quilt, and for all the kindness and love and patience with which you have been so generous. But one of the things I have experienced this past month is that sense of hopelessness which accompanies physical weakness, whether from illness or necessary recovery. It took me by surprise, actually. It's that feeling that recovery to wellness and wholeness is impossible, or at least unlikely. I jokingly have said that I lost my 'spark', and couldn't seem to get it back. I understand better now, that many of you have felt that way far too often, and I think that I have gained a better understanding of what that's like. In some small way, I think I can share that feeling with you now. And it has given me a better insight, I think, into the ordeal the apostles experienced in those days after Jesus' death.

The presence of Christ came out of the sealed tomb, through the locked door, past all the dangers of that terrible weekend in Jerusalem, and stood among the faithful, bringing reassurance, peace, and a renewed sense of purpose. The hopeless cycle of personal drama evaporated in that presence, and there was rejoicing. Jesus breathed the Spirit of God's own breath, that 'spark' of *zoe*, into the empty vessels of their hearts, and the world took a special turn in the right direction. Together, we are called to be the presence of Christ to one another and to the world; that's our assignment in our own generation if we choose to be apostles. And here's the witness: Christ's presence has been present to me through you. And it has been transformative, and encouraging, and reassuring, and compelling. Please continue to be Christ's presence to each other. Stay faithfully at your posts and keep watch. Don't let anything, especially personal drama, get in the way or lock you out.

In today's reading from the Book of Acts of the Apostles, we see how the presence of Jesus has begun to transform the cowering disciples into brave leaders, just a short time after that evening in the locked room. Despite restrictive orders given by the authorities, and repeated over and over again, Peter and the others insist that it is their fearless mission to proclaim the Gospel good news, even on the street corners if necessary. They have received the 'spark' of the Holy Spirit, the enthusiasm and love of life, and have been restored to the work with which Jesus has meant to entrust them. Their understanding of Christ has grown and matured, becoming more complete and more powerful by the day. They are ready and willing to join Thomas in exclaiming "My Lord and my God!" when recognizing Jesus' presence among them in that room. May we also come to recognize Christ in every room we share with one another, knowing that, no matter what, God is in the room! Amen.