

SERMON  
First Lutheran Church  
Aitkin, Minnesota

John 20.19-31  
Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen  
April 15, 2012

It was my first year as a pastor. It was the week before Sunday school classes would be starting and we didn't have enough teachers. During Sunday morning announcements, I had asked for folks to volunteer to teach. At the end of the service, nobody offered but then a young woman stepped up. She said, "**Hi, my name is Jane Doe (changed by me). These are my three children. We just moved to town. We'd like to join the church and I would love to teach Sunday school.**" Well, the ushers picked me up off of the floor (unfortunately too few people step up to help with kids.) That day I welcomed a new family and we gained a teacher.

The next Sunday, her little boy, **Johnny** (changed,) helped me with my children's sermon about **God being like batteries in a flashlight, helping us to shine brightly in a sometimes dark world.** After church, my family hosted the neighboring pastor, **Bob Skipper**, and his family for lunch. As we ate, the phone rang and an emergency message came. "**There's been an accident on the highway outside of Outing. We need Pastor Skipper (an E.M.T.) to get right out there. The ambulance is on the way from Remer.**" Bob jumped up from the table and together we went to the scene of the accident. There on the edge of the highway lay little **Johnny**. He had been riding his bicycle and was struck by a car.

Long story short, Bob Skipper did what he could with **Johnny** while I, along with neighbors, supported Johnny's mom. Her husband, an over-the-road trucker was in some distant state. The ambulance came and raced **Johnny** down to Crosby. Brand new neighbors offered to care for the other two children and I drove **Jane** to the hospital. Within minutes the Crosby folks said, "**There's nothing that we can do here. He'll need to go to Duluth.**" Back on the road, Mom and I chased the ambulance to Duluth. It didn't take long for the **very bad news** to come. Johnny was brain dead. He would be kept alive until his father could get back to Minnesota. For two more days we stayed there in that hospital waiting for his return.

Johnny's parents asked this brand new, wet-behind-the-ears pastor to travel to their hometown in Buffalo, Minnesota to preach at his funeral. It

was my second funeral ever. My first was for a very old guy who died feeding ducks by his cabin. **What do you say when a seven year old dies?**

Johnny's funeral was on Friday. I got back home that evening, visited with my wife for an hour or so and then went to bed, exhausted. Sometime after midnight there came a loud banging at our front door. When I open it, the person outside said, "**There's been a terrible accident on the highway south of town. We need a pastor.**" A twenty-something fellow on his way home from drinking in a nearby bar, had gone across the center line, and clear out onto the opposite shoulder where he hit a car load of kids on their way to Bible camp. When I arrived, the E.M.T.s were caring for several little kids laid out in the grass along the shoulder. The man who hit them, trapped in his car, had burned to death. **Why did they need a pastor?** They wanted me to go and tell his wife that he had died. She was the waitress in the bar where he had been drinking. He left behind a little girl, about age 7. I conducted his funeral the following Monday.

Not long after I got home from my second funeral of the week, **I decided that there was no God.** How could such wicked things happen if there is a loving God? I was in a funk, seemingly floating in blackness. My wife counseled me, "**Just do what you can and let God do the rest. Don't try to carry the whole world on your shoulders.**" Her words didn't seem to help. It didn't seem like there was a god. Before the next weekend it dawned on me. "**I don't think that God wants little boys or young fathers to die in tragic car accidents. I don't think that the world is the way God wants it to be. That's why Jesus came.**" After considering these thoughts for a while, I concluded, "**Jesus came to save the world, to heal the world and he has invited me to be a part of that work.**

**Where was God** when those two precious human beings died? I have since come to believe that God was truly there in the **EMTs** who as volunteers came to our rescue. God came in the **neighbors** who cared for the kids. In the folks who lovingly served **funeral lunches**, brought **hot dishes** to the home or sent **cards with money**... And in still others who lent a **listening ear** for pain and grief to be gently carried away. **I've doubted God since then too, but Jesus has always brought me back.**

In the face of such devastating death, I came to the conclusion that there couldn't be a loving God. **Thomas**, one of the original twelve disciples, spent three years following Jesus around in this broken world. He watched as Jesus forgave sins, healed the sick, fed hungry people and even brought the dead back to life. Thomas and those other early Christians must have been **so hopeful for God's coming future**. But, for those same men, on that first Easter Sunday, their **precious Jesus lay dead** in a tomb, victim of a wicked, murderous world. All hope was gone. Behind locked doors they hid, except for **Judas** who had killed himself, and **Thomas**, who alone must have had the courage to venture outside. Even people who have never been to church know him as "**doubting Thomas**." **Thomas and I have both doubted Jesus...**

Jesus came to them. "**Peace be with you**," twice Jesus said, as he appeared in their midst. How could this be, Jesus alive again? How could God give peace after such a wrenching death? Yet, there was Jesus - giving them **God's peace** (a peace that passes all understanding,) the gift of the **Holy Spirit** (like in our own baptism) and then a **mission** to help Jesus to save and heal the world.

Then Jesus left them there alone again. When Thomas rejoined them, they told him all about it. What was his reaction? "**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**." A week later, (that'd be tonight,) the disciples were still sitting in that locked room. Apparently Jesus' resurrection from the dead hadn't impacted their lives too much. Maybe they still weren't certain about Jesus being God yet either. Maybe they were still **more fearful of the world** than they were **hopeful of Jesus?** Whatever, Thomas was there and Jesus came again. "**Peace be with you**." Jesus spoke a third time. Then he revealed his wounds to Thomas who said, "**My Lord and my God**." Jesus responded, "**Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe**." I think that maybe Jesus had me and you in mind here... **Have you seen Jesus? Do you believe?**

At any rate, before long, this first motley crew of Christians were out in that world following and proclaiming Jesus. Our Gospel text tells us that all of these things happened "**so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name**." What does it mean to have **life in Jesus' name?**

Remember the old guy who died feeding the ducks, my first funeral? When I drove into Knud and Emmy Pedersen's yard that day, **I was fearful of death. What can I say in the face of Knud's death?** Emmy must have read the worry in my face. As she came out the front door to greet me, she said, "**Oh Pastor, don't worry. There is a story that goes something like this. 'We stand on the shore and watch as the ship carrying our loved one sails away. And we say, "There he goes." And we are very sad. But on the other shore they stand watching and they say, "Here he comes" and they are very glad.'**" (Adapted from a poem by Henry Van Dyke.) What does it mean to have **life in Jesus' name?**

Over the years, I've come to see that human beings tend to forget about a faithful, caring God when everything is going just fine. Who needs God if we can take care of ourselves? But, when **trouble strikes**, when **death comes knocking**, our vision, our hearing and awareness of God becomes ever so clear. **It is at our most broken and needy times that God seems to do God's best work of loving and caring for us, of calling us to faith.** Or at least that's when we can see it most clearly. When people are hurting, that's the time when the Church can do its best work of caring too. Doubting Thomas saw the risen Lord Jesus most clearly when Jesus came bearing the wounds of our world. **Have you seen Jesus in your wounded times?**

This past week, I stopped by the food shelf to thank the people for serving. **Jan Dickinson**, Food Shelf Coordinator, shared this little **remembrance** which she wrote about her husband **Wayne** a couple of years ago after he died. She entitled it, "**The Gospel According to Wayne.**"

"When Wayne was in the hospital last January, there was one time when I did not spend the night. When I came in the next morning, Wayne had this big smile on his face. I hadn't seen him smile like that in a long while. I jokingly asked him what he had for breakfast that made him so happy. He then looked at me and said early that morning; **God had put His hand on Wayne's head and told him that he was His child.** Wayne then told God, "**If I am your child, then You must be my Father.**" I believe that what happened was real for Wayne's face glowed with the knowledge that had been God's gift to him. That day Wayne was filled with the Holy Spirit and was telling everyone that came into his room the good news. I believe that this **message was meant for Wayne to help him**

through the days and weeks that were to come. But this message is also for everyone who will hear it – for we are not alone in our struggles. We do have a loving Father who watches over us.

May this message give you hope and brighten your days. It would please Wayne so very much to know that his gospel lives on and is being shared.”

Two thousand years ago, Jesus appeared on the heels of his own death. To the people who **betrayed**, **denied**, **abandoned**, **hid** and **doubted** him, Jesus said, “**Peace be with you.**” Then Jesus gave them the **Holy Spirit** so that they could believe that **even death can’t stop his coming to be with God’s people.** This weekend, little **Logan Patrick Henke**, in his baptism, received that **same peaceful promise** and that **same Spirit of Life.** So do the **children** in our Sunday school classes. So do the **young couples** among us for whom we are asking God’s marriage blessing. **God’s peaceful promise**, the **Spirit of Life** and the **mission to walk with Jesus** in our world – given for you, for your family and mine too. Thanks be to God. Amen.