



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday After Easter, April 8th, 2007

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.

Today's Gospel tells how Jesus launched a movement that radically changed the way in which his followers see the world and the way in which the world looks at Christians. Yet from our perspective some 2000 years later, Jesus' appearance to his disciples on the evening of Easter Day was quite unspectacular -- nothing like the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

St. John relates that the disciples had barricaded themselves in a secret hideout, terrified they were about to be arrested by Jewish Temple police. They were so wrapped up in their own fears and sorrows that they were completely unaware of Jesus' presence until he said: "Shalom" -- the Jewish equivalent of "Hi." Their first reaction was shock. They thought they were seeing a ghost. John tells us that they didn't believe Jesus was flesh and blood until he showed them the fresh wounds in his hands and side.

St. Luke gives the story in even greater detail in the 24th Chapter of his Gospel -- the Gospel appointed for Tuesday in Easter Week. The two disciples, who had met and talked with Jesus at the village of Emmaus, had hurried back to tell the others of their meeting with the risen Christ.

Suddenly, as the two were speaking, the disciples saw Jesus standing among them: "Why are you troubled?" he said, "Why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."

To make his point beyond any doubt, he showed them his hands and feet -- still bearing the marks of the nails that held him to the cross and the spear wound in his side. Then, he asked for food and ate it, not because he was hungry, but to prove he was not an apparition or a figment of their collective imaginations, but solid, flesh and bone.

What could have been the purpose of all this? Why did Jesus take such trouble to point out that he was in the flesh? He had to be trying to tell us something. The point should be obvious: Jesus is telling us that we, like him, will be resurrected in the flesh: "That though this body be destroyed," as the Book of Job puts it, "in our flesh we shall see God."

When he had finally convinced them he was actually among them in the flesh, he did something that took them by surprise. He endowed his them with powers that hitherto God had reserved entirely for himself. Jesus gave them the authority to forgive people's sins. He breathed on them and said: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

In doing so, he instituted his priesthood and laid down the formula by which they were to be ordained. You'll find it on Page 546 of the BCP. The bishop, together with all of the priests present, lays hands on the ordinand and declares: "Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and Work of a Priest in the Church of God, now

committed unto thee by the Imposition of our hands. Whose sins thou dost forgive, they are forgiven; and whose sins thou dost retain they are retained."

There are folks who assume Jesus' conferral of power to forgive sins on the priests of his church was simply a symbolic act – a morale booster for folks who had had a rough time of things, so to speak. But that is scarcely a reasonable assumption.

There was nothing casual about what Jesus did. It was not an after-thought. It was the very first act that he performed after his resurrection. What's more, he did not equivocate or use ambiguous language. There's nothing vague or obscure about the words: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

It is a statement as definite and unequivocal as those Christ used to institute the Eucharist: "This is my body . . . This is my blood." In other words, like the Holy Communion, the power to remit sins is not just a "badge or token, but rather a certain sure witness, and effectual sign of grace." (*Article XXV of the Articles of Religion.*)

Today, 2000 years after the event, the need for the institution of priesthood with the power to forgive sins is probably not as apparent as it was back then. With the resurrection, a New Covenant superseded the Covenant God had concluded with the children of Israel in the wilderness. And with the New Covenant, the old system of expiating sins – animal sacrifices by priests at the Temple in Jerusalem – had been rendered obsolete.

Just as the animal sacrifices in the Temple had been supplanted by Jesus' "one oblation of himself once offered," so a new priesthood was needed to replace the Aaronic priesthood established in the wilderness.

The quiet, unspectacular appearance of Jesus in that barricaded room might not have been as dramatic as the crossing of the Red Sea or the

making of the Old Covenant in the wilderness. But it was no less epoch-making. It transformed a tiny group of terrified people into the most fearless evangelists the world has seen.

Indeed, one might reasonably argue that, in terms of its effect on the world, it was one of the most momentous events in the history of the world. The people present in that locked room set in motion the transformation of what we now call Western society -- what our forebears once unashamedly knew as Christendom.

In transforming the West, Christ is transforming the world. This is not something that is achieved easily or without great sacrifices. Few of those men in that locked room died natural deaths. Human beings do not like submitting to God's agenda. What do you think this current vicious wave of terrorism is about?

But it is battle the terrorists will ultimately lose. For the transformation is being effected not by the sword or by such things as nuclear energy, electric power, the automobile, the washing machine and the television set. It's being transformed by faith in the fact that every individual, no matter how high or low their estate, is equally precious in the eyes of their creator.

And because we are all so precious to him, God gave his only begotten son to pay the full price for our sinfulness. As a consequence, his forgiveness is ours simply for the asking. And all that God seeks in return for this is we demonstrate our love for him by love our fellows as much as we love ourselves.

Over the centuries, faith in Christ has radically restructured society. It has swept away the rationalizations and intellectual accommodations that permitted the tyranny of ancient kings and murderous modern utopians to enslave the human soul by usurping God's place in the human heart. And all this in motion with the words: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost: whosoever sins ye remit they are remitted unto them; and whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained."

AMEN