



REFORMED
EPISCOPAL
**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

**A Sermon for the
First Sunday after Easter
St. John 5:4-12 &
St. John 20:19-23**
The Rev'd William Klock

April 27, 2025

In the ancient church this was the Sunday when the men and women baptised on Easter would take off their white baptismal robes after a long week of celebrating their baptism. Now it was time for the church to go out into the world to be the new people Jesus and the Spirit had made them. At Rome, in those ancient days, the newly baptised would do this at the church of St. Pancras—a church named after a young Roman martyr. Because of his faithfulness he would become a patron of oaths and vows. Now it was time to live out their baptismal vows, like that young martyr. They'd given their allegiance in faith to Jesus. Now it was time to march out into the world, to proclaim him as the crucified and risen king, and to fight the world, the flesh, and the devil—not matter the cost.

Brothers and Sisters, as the Easter story continues, we're reminded that Jesus didn't die and rise from death just to zap us to heaven the moment we believe. He didn't die and rise again to create an escape hatch out of the world or even out of persecution and martyrdom. He died and rose again so that we might live for him and carry the good news—like royal heralds of the king—out to the far reaches of God's creation. This has been the mission of the people of God all along, going all the way back to Abraham. He and then his family were called and set apart by the Lord to be a light in the darkness. They were the people who lived with the living God in their midst. Through

them, God revealed himself to the nations.

Or, at any rate, that's how the plan had started. Abraham's family, Israel, largely failed in her mission. That was part of the plan too. It showed that it would take more than calling and creating and sending a special people to be light in the darkness. The human race has a heart problem. Instead of desiring God, we desire everything else. Instead of worshipping him, we make idols. And Israel had that same heart problem. And so that story of calling and sending and failure leads us to Jesus. It was meant to from the very beginning. He came to set his people to rights—at least those who would follow him, who would trust him, who would give their allegiance to him as messiah—as God's king. And in his death and resurrection Jesus defeated the powers of the old age and inaugurated God's new creation. But John stresses, this time something was different. This new people isn't just called and sent. This time they're also *transformed* and *equipped*. And that's really the theme of this Sunday after Easter. Every week we're sent out with those words: "Go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord." Friends, that dismissal is a call to go out and swim in our baptism, to go our and to proclaim the risen Lord, to go out and do battle with the world, the flesh, and the devil. I suspect that a lot of the time we respond, "Thanks be to God" without even thinking about any of that. But those times when we do think about what those words mean, it's easy to feel overwhelmed—especially when the scriptures or the liturgy or the sermon has really spoken to us that day and we have a clear sense of why God has called us and saved us—it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

So Brothers and Sisters, as we stand overwhelmed by the task before us, John assures us that if we are in Jesus by faith, there are two vitally important new realities for us. The first is that we have been made part of his new creation. We have a share in

Jesus' resurrection from death. Yes, there's more to come. We haven't been resurrected yet. That will come some day at the end of the age when the gospel, through the Church, has accomplished its purpose and brought the world to Jesus. But in the meantime, Jesus' resurrection has freed us from our bondage to sin and death and given us new life. And, *second*, that if we are in Jesus, he has given us God's own Spirit. He's made us his temple, the place where he dwells. The Spirit's not something to be earned when we've become holy enough. He's not some later experience or second blessing, as if we can be in Jesus, but not have a share in the Spirit. Jesus' gift of the Spirit is the very thing that fulfils God's promise through the prophets and that defines us as his new covenant people. And as Jesus forgives and frees us by his death and resurrection, the indwelling Spirit empowers and equips us to live the new life Jesus has given. The Spirit's life in us is a foretaste and a down payment on the resurrection and the life of the age to come—and most importantly in light of today's theme, the indwelling Spirit is the one who makes the task set before us by Jesus possible. He's the one who equips us to fulfil those impossible vows we made in our baptism.

In our Gospel, again John 20 beginning at verse 19, John tells us:

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors were shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Judeans. Jesus came and stood in the middle of them. "Peace be with you," he said.

We shouldn't pass over these words too quickly. It's the first day of the week. It's still the same day that Mary went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body and found it empty. It's the same day she went running to tell Peter and John. The same day they went running to the tomb to see for themselves. The same day when John says none of them—except, it seems,

for him—understood what had happened. John says he “believed” and I think that means he believed Jesus had risen, but that was crazy and he was still working it through so he hadn’t said anything to the others yet. This is that same day. Now it’s evening. And the disciples have locked themselves into someone’s house. The doors are locked. I expect the windows tightly shuttered. There was no cooking fire. Nothing that might make the house look occupied—nothing to give them away. Maybe one little lamp, just so they could barely see each other in the darkness. They were afraid. Four days before, the Jewish authorities had arrested Jesus. Three days before he’s been crucified as a dangerous revolutionary. Soon, they figured, the authorities would come for the rest of them. Best to lay low until things blew over. Maybe in a few days they could sneak out of the city. And so they sat there in the darkness, some silently pondering what all this meant, some still weeping for their dead friend, maybe a couple of them arguing in low tones about what had happened to Jesus’ body and what they’d do next. But whatever they were doing, a palpable sense of fear filled that dark room. John’s telling of the story of new creation reverberates with echoes of the story of the first creation: Darkness was over the face of the deep.

And then Jesus is suddenly there. John wrote about the Incarnation back in his prologue saying that in Jesus the light had come into the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it. That was an echo of Genesis. The first day of the week God called light into being, driving away the darkness. And now the Light Incarnate appears in that dark, fear-filled house and I have to think that somehow and in some way it was filled with light—a light that drove away every last vestige of darkness. And to these frightened men, Jesus announces, “Peace be with you!”

Imagine their surprise. And there must have been some disbelief or some doubts. Or maybe, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, they simply didn’t recognise him. Something about his resurrection had brought a transformation. Same Jesus, same body, but in some way just different enough in appearance that they didn’t recognise him. Of course, it wouldn’t have helped that they simply didn’t expect to see him again either. So Jesus holds out his hands for them to see. One at a time he lifts a foot out so that they can see. There were the marks left by the nails. And he lifted his tunic to show them the wound left by the spear that had been plunged into his side, the wound that had gushed forth blood and water, evidence to the soldiers that he was genuinely dead. And here he stood alive. They were shocked. How could it be? I’ve said before, the reason resurrection wasn’t on anyone’s mind was because this wasn’t how it was supposed to happen. This wasn’t a story Jews would have made up, because all the Jews who believed in the resurrection of the dead knew how it would work—and it wasn’t supposed to work this way. At the end of the age the Lord would raise all the faithful at once. There was plenty of disagreement about some of the specifics, but they all knew one thing for sure: It would be everybody all at once, not just one person, even if that one person was the Messiah. This just wasn’t on their radar. Not at all. But now it is and they’re confused and, it seems, even though John says they were glad, they were still more than a little afraid. And so Jesus says to them again, “Peace be with you!”

And Jesus doesn’t waste any time as John tells it. “Peace be with you,” he says, calming their fears. Jesus is alive. And immediately he gets down to the very practical aspects, the real-world implications of his resurrection. Jesus doesn’t waste any time. He says in verse 21:

“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”

Think about that. Here they are, hunkered down for fear of being rounded up and executed. Here they are, afraid to even show their faces in Jerusalem. Here they are, giving it a few days before they try to sneak out of town without being noticed. And Jesus says to them, “I’m sending you. As the Father sent me to you, I’m now sending you: to Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria...to the ends of the earth.” In other words, “You’re not going to go slinking out of the city under cover of darkness. No, you’re going out into Jerusalem with boldness—the same way I went out into Galilee, through Judea, and eventually to Jerusalem at the head of a parade, hailed by the people. You’re going to go with the same boldness out into this city and you are going to declare what God has done. Everyone is going to know who you are. You’re going to declare to Jerusalem that this Jesus whom they crucified died and has been raised from the dead, that he really is the Messiah, God’s King, and that his kingdom, God’s new creation has come.”

Think again of John, just beginning to wrap his head around the idea that Jesus had been raised from death—but still hunkered down with the others, afraid. John couldn’t even tell his friends what he thought had happened. The last thing on his mind was telling it to Jerusalem—and Jesus isn’t talking about mere “telling”—you know, whispering it to a few people who might be safe to tell. No, he’s talking about *proclaiming* this news—to everybody. Brothers and Sisters, think about that for a minute. Most of us are hesitant to proclaim the good news about Jesus. We have no reason to fear for our lives like Jesus’ disciples did. The worst thing that happens to us is we offend someone, make them think we’re weird. They faced martyrdom—and all but John were, indeed, martyred for their proclamation. We have so little to

fear, but we're afraid anyway. We've even stopped speaking in terms of proclamation—the Bible's way of speaking about evangelism. Instead we talk about "sharing" our faith—watering it down, as if it's just another option on the religious smorgasbord that someone might want to try out for themselves. We've lost our confidence in the good news and in the God who raised Jesus from the dead who stands behind it. No, Jesus calls us to *declare* the good news like royal heralds, sent out into the world to declare the mighty deeds of God, that he has raised Jesus from the dead, and made him Lord of all.

But, again, consider John. Confused, afraid, just beginning to understand. And then consider the confidence of his words, written decades later in our Epistle:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah has been fathered by God...because everything that has been fathered by God conquers the world. This is the victory that conquers the world: our faith. Who is the one who conquers the world? Surely the one who believes that Jesus is the son of God! (1 John 5:1, 4-5)

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah—God's king—has been reborn as part of the people of God. And that belief changes everything. That belief transforms the fearful John hesitant to even tell his friends about the dawning realization that Jesus had been raised from death, it turns him into the courageous apostle, exiled for his proclamation of that truth, and writing boldly to the churches to stand firm in that same faith even though great tribulation was about to hit them like a storm. There is everything to be feared out in the world: rejection, mockery, persecution, even martyrdom, but by faith the people of God overcome and stand firm in our witness. It's not because faith changes reality. It's because this faith recognizes the new reality born that

first Easter when Jesus rose from the grave, the new reality that he is victor over sin and death, the new reality that new creation has begun in him, and the new reality that he is Lord of that creation. By faith we are united with him. By faith we share in his inheritance. And by faith we share in his calling and ministry—his Church, taking up the mantle of prophet, priest, and king.

Like John, we are called to boldly testify about Jesus.

It was he who came by means of water and blood, Jesus the Messiah, not by water only but by the water and the blood. The Spirit is the one who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth. There are three that bear witness—the Spirit, the water, and the blood—and these three agree together. If we have received the witness of men, God's witness is greater. This is the witness of God, the testimony he has borne concerning his son. (1 John 5:6-9)

John points back to Jesus' ministry. He came by water. That was the start of it. He went to John and was baptised in the Jordan and as he walked up out of the river, the heavens opened, the Spirit descended like a dove, and his Father spoke, "This is my Son in whom I am well-pleased." That was Jesus' initiation into his messianic ministry. And that ministry—at least in its earthly phase—ended in blood, at the cross, where he died to conquer death and to provide forgiveness of sins. Jesus' baptism testifies to his being the Messiah. Jesus' blood, shed on the cross, testifies to his being the Messiah. And, too, John writes, so does the Spirit. And, he says, consider all the things we believe, in which we trust, based on the testimony of mere men. How much more, Brothers and Sisters, ought we to trust this testimony about Jesus backed up by God himself? And not so much just receiving and believing ourselves, but in light of the fact that this is the truth,

this is the good news that literally changes the world, that *is* changing the world, oughtn't we to be *proclaiming* it to that world? Through Jesus and the Spirit God has given us the light. The light that will transform the darkness that sin and death have cast on the world. The light that the darkness cannot and will not ever overcome. Dear Friends, don't hide it under a basket. Hold it high. Proclaim it. Show it to everyone. Don't be afraid. God has spoken: "Let there be light!" And as John wrote in his Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has no overcome it." He goes on in verse 10:

All those who believe in the son of God have the witness in themselves.

But that's not where John leaves us in the Gospel. Jesus doesn't just send his disciples out into the world. That would be an impossible task. Jesus also equips them. Look at verses 22-23 of John 20:

With that, he breathed on them. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he said. "If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

As the Lord breathed life into Adam in the original creation, Jesus now breathes on his disciples. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says. Was the Spirit literally imparted by Jesus' breath? Luke tells this part differently in his Gospel and in Acts—that whole event with the dramatic coming of the Spirit at Pentecost as they gathered at the temple to hear Peter preach and to be baptised. But notice there, too, that the Spirit comes with a wind—in both Hebrew and Greek, wind, breath, and spirit are all the same word. Jesus was good at acted-out prophecy and I think that's what he's doing in this case in John's Gospel. He is—or he soon will be—imparting God's Spirit to this new people of God, to those who believe, and he illustrates just what this gift is by an act that they couldn't help but connect to God's giving life

to Adam. But this is *new* life. And this is what will equip them to go out, despite the threat of death, to proclaim with boldness the good news. Brothers and Sisters, the Spirit does a lot for us, but here Jesus makes sure we know what his primary purpose is. It's not to give us radical experiences, although that certainly might happen. It's not to make us holy, although he certainly does that as he turns our hearts and our affections away from self and sin and points them towards God. But, the *primary* purpose of the Spirit is to equip us to do the impossible: to do for the world, what Jesus did for Israel. To go out in the world in his name and to proclaim what God has done through him. **“As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.”**

And then those words that have so often been misunderstood and abused: “If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” Remember I said that by faith we have a share in Jesus’ inheritance and ministry. By faith the Father adopts us and makes us his sons and daughters, so we share in what belongs to Jesus. And that means that as he is King and Prophet and Priest, so are we as his Church, his people. And Jesus gets here at two of those things. Here he reminds his friends and he reminds us that when we go out into the world to proclaim his Lordship, to proclaim the good news of his death and resurrection, to proclaim that new creation has come, we do so as both prophets and as priests.

Our message is two-fold. I think the priestly role comes most naturally to us. This is the part of our proclamation where we announce the forgiveness of sins. Think of the priests of the Old Testament, offering sacrifices. That was one of their main duties: to facilitate and to mediate God’s forgiveness to the people. Think of Jesus. He is both priest and sacrificial lamb. He offers and presents himself to the Father as a

sacrifice for our sins. And, as priests, we proclaim to the world the forgiveness he offers through that sacrifice. But that is not our only role. We also share in Jesus’ prophetic office—and that’s the part that doesn’t come as naturally to us, at least not as things currently are. But consider what the prophets did. Consider what Jesus did in his role as a prophet. He called out the sins of his people, he summoned them to repentance, and he announced the judgement to come on those who remained unrepentant in their sin, unbelief, and faithlessness. In contrast, much of the Church today is afraid to take on this prophetic role, to name sin, to even use the word. Some parts of the Church have given up altogether and have embraced sin and called it virtue—leaving folks nothing to repent of and with nothing for which they need forgiveness. They’ve gutted the gospel. But these two things, the priestly and the prophetic go hand in hand. Our prophetic office, announcing judgement, is without hope if we do not also fulfil our priestly role of announcing forgiveness. But our priestly office, our message of forgiveness lacks any real meaning if it is not also accompanied by the prophetic announcement that sin is sin and that God will judge it. Brothers and Sisters, this is the good news: that we are sinners, that our holy God judges sin and that the penalty is death, but also that Jesus has died as a perfect sacrifice for sins, and has risen, victor over death, inaugurating God’s new creation and giving a sure and certain hope that what he has begun he will finish. One day all things will be made new, every bit of sin and evil will be swept from creation, and all will be set to rights. And by faith in Jesus we have a share in that new world.

Brothers and Sisters, do we believe that? I trust that we do. We affirm this belief every week as we come to the Lord’s Table. We recall the story. We confess our sins in repentance. And we come to the Table in renewed

faith to participate again in those events that set us free from sin and death, in the death and resurrection of Jesus. But maybe we’ve forgotten the real power behind what we confess here at the Table. Friends, think this morning on what the cross and the empty tomb mean. Think on what the blood of Jesus means. Think on what his gift of the Spirit to you means. And then take seriously those words of dismissal: “Go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord.” Consider that in those words Jesus is saying to us, to you and to me, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.”

Let’s pray: Almighty Father, you gave your only Son to die for our sins and to rise again for our justification: Grant that we may put away the leaven of malice and wickedness, and always serve you in purity and truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*