

Second Week of Easter Service
Lutheran Center Chapel
April 15, 2012
Mark S. Hanson, Presiding Bishop

Acts 4: 32-35
John 20: 19-31

Grace and peace in the name of Jesus. Amen.

“Nothing.” We are a church that believes that. Nothing. Please don’t tweet that until you hear the rest. Last evening at our table there was such passion as we talked about what an opportune moment this is for a powerful and grace-filled witness to the gospel. It just may be that our testimony begins with the word, “Nothing.” I realize that the word is not in our reading for this morning. Yet, it became for me a lens that sharpened my focus on our lesson. Well, not just the word “nothing,” but as it is found in Romans 8.

It was a conversation I had on Holy Saturday with Bishop Martin Wells that got me thinking about this. I called him to ask what the Great Three Days were for him after experiencing his brother’s death in the past year. Bishop Wells said he had been dwelling in the Word as found in Romans 8 in Eugene Peterson’s *The Message*:

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed
all day long;
we are accounted
as sheep to be slaughtered.”

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (NRSV, Romans 8: 31-39).

I’m absolutely convinced that NOTHING, absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way that Jesus our Master has embraced us. NOTHING—not our FAILURES or FEARS. Is there greater evidence of that than the risen Christ’s astonishing decision to appear unannounced and uninvited to his disciples locked behind the door that first Easter evening?

Talk about failures—oh yes, those disciples had left everything to follow Jesus, but as soon as things go dicey—Peter the vocal loyalist denies Jesus three times. Judas sells him out. The rest of the disciples ran away, leaving Jesus to suffer and die abandoned and alone. And that was after Jesus had been very clear with them at least three times. “I am going to Jerusalem. There I will undergo great suffering, be rejected, be killed. After three days, I will rise again.” I know I have asked this before, but don’t you wonder at least once in a while, “What in the world was going on with Jesus?” Risen from the dead

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now with a few days to prepare those to whom he would entrust the good news of God's kingdom and he goes back to that group of miserable failures locked in fear. They who never did like with whom Jesus associated, who protested when he healed on the Sabbath, who doubted he could feed a crowd with those pitiful few fish and loaves of bread.

Why Jesus? An executive coach would not have charged you much to convince you that going back to them is a foolish idea. Certainly, the coach could have hooked Jesus up with a search firm specifying in disciples.

Ah, but Jesus believed that NOTHING, nothing will separate those failures locked in fear from the love of God. Wouldn't you think Jesus would have at least waited outside the door and listened in on their conversation to hear if they had begun to sort out their atonement? But no. No evidence of such caution on Jesus' part. Rather, he appeared in their midst unannounced, uninvited (not unlike the Word appearing in the flesh in the first chapter of John). The risen Christ appeared, saying, "Peace be with you." Oh it could be heard as an ordinary greeting of the day. Shalom. I hear it as God's most extraordinary gift of grace. Jesus' saying "although I justifiably could have started over with another 12, I am here in peace. I have remained faithful to you and forgive you. Your resurrection from guilt and bondage to sin and fear has begun."

Bishop Margaret Payne and I were reflecting upon preaching on Easter Sunday. One year she had just had it with the culture's Easter and the empty Alleluias of our culture's Easter hype. She needed to be with a community where she could experience the power of what it means to be a new creation in Christ. So Bishop Payne preached that Easter service in a prison. With those locked up she said, "Allelulia, Christ is risen today!" That morning she baptized an inmate into Christ's death and the presence and promise of Christ's resurrection. She was experiencing and preaching the power of NOTHING.

I'm absolutely convinced that nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way Jesus has embraced us.

NOTHING. Not our failures or our fears. What a word of release for a people who live imprisoned by fears, our fears of ourselves, fears that drive us into enclaves of the like-minded, fears that cause us to fortify borders and erect barriers of supposed self-protection, to isolate us and insulate us from those whom we fear.

And we have a word of witness for such a fear, for such a people. NOTHING. No fears will separate you from the love of God, but beware for when you are caught in the embrace of Jesus' love. For when Christ Jesus is our peace; in his flesh, he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us (NRSV Ephesians 2:14).

A pastor e-mailed me a picture of a mural of the Last Supper that she had invited her congregation to create together. But instead of the 12 disciples, she asked worshipers to cut out or draw images that represent people or groups of people you wish weren't invited to Christ's table but who are. The table in the mural was made out of images of bread and wine. When it came time for the Eucharist in the liturgy, there were those faces they had drawn for when nothing separates us from the love of God, peace is our host and we will dine with those we fear and flee, those we have decided are failures, unworthy of an invitation. So what do you think? Maybe we should stop and do a little mural painting right now. Whose faces would be in your painting?

Here are my doubts about doubters these days. The most vocal doubters I hear are not those passionate, Thomas-like doubters who want to put their hands in Jesus' side because they know if this is the crucified one, now risen, the whole world changes. There is a new creation. Nothing will separate them from the love of God—nothing living or dead, nothing today or tomorrow, nothing thinkable or unthinkable.

But so much of the doubt heard as Christ's witness today is the arrogant doubt of those who are so certain of their faith, their certitude, such that they are delivered from all ambiguities, uncertainties, transience of hum existence. Their only doubts are of the sincerity of another's faith. So doubt does not drive them to their knees at the feet of Jesus but becomes a wedge dividing the community of Jesus' followers into those whom the doubters deem to be faithful and unfaithful. They doubt that Nothing will separate us. In fact, they define what will and does.

Yet did you hear Eugene Peterson? "Do you think anyone is going to be able to drive a wedge between us and Christ's love for us?" There is no way! Not trouble, not hard times, not hatred, not hunger, not homelessness, not bullying threats, not backstabbing, not even the worst sins listed in Scripture!

Nothing—so are we there? Is that our witness? Not our witness, but the Spirit's witness, the spirit of the risen Christ breathes into us, sending us into the world with the promise of the Gospel.

But take a deep breath because are we really ready for the radical implications of a testimony that begins with nothing? Nothing can get between us and God's love because of the way Jesus has embraced us. Are you ready for the implications of such absolute confidence in NOTHING? Because if you believe that nothing will separate us, then go home, gather all your assets, get to your bank, withdraw your checking and savings, get to your IRA and pension funds, take all those precious possessions. Because if you really believe that nothing will separate us, then you and I and all our wealth and possessions are going to be in a leaky boat and when we get out, the boat won't leak and all in it with you will have each according to their needs.

So Romans 8 shaping our focus of our John 20 reading is maybe helpful, but do we hear its implications in Acts? "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them (NRSV Acts 4:32-34).

Do we believe that the incarnation of Jesus connects the economically advantaged to a common future with the economically marginalized? Have we as a church tucked away in our files our social statement *Sufficient, Sustainable Livelihood for All* or does it drive our decisions and way of life? Do we regale them as powerful or objects of our acts of compassion and mercy? Or does our belief that nothing will separate us from the love of God drive us to poverty, being an issue of justice?

What shall our witness as a church be? Listen to Gregory the Great, 600 A.D. "We must make people clearly understand that the Lord that yields them income is the common property of all and its fruits are for the common welfare."¹

¹ Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, vol. 11 in *Ancient Christian Writers* (Paulist Press, 1950), pp. 158-159.

It is therefore absurd for people to think they are not robbers when they do not pass on what they have received to their neighbors. Absurd. Because almost as many folks lack daily food as there are rations locked up for use at home. Really, when we administer any necessities to the poor, we give them their own. We do not bestow *our* goods upon them; we do not fulfill works of mercy. We discharge the debt of justice. What was given by a common God is justly used when those who have received it use it in a common good.

Friends, there is no better time than now for a Spirit-filled, Christ-called, grateful witness from a people who believe that NOTHING—absolutely nothing can get between us and God’s love because of the way Jesus has embraced us. No better time than now for us. Are we ready?