



*Welcome to St. Olympia Orthodox Church,
a young and, God willing, growing community of worshippers.
Join us for prayer and fellowship.
Divine Liturgies are held every Sunday
and are preceded by Great Vespers every Saturday evening.
Services are primarily in English.*

Next Services

**Saturday
April 21st**

**Great Vespers at 5:00
pm**

**Sunday
April 22nd**

**Sunday of the
Myrrhbearers**

**Divine Liturgy
at 10:00 am**

at

**St. Olympia Chapel
123 Main Street
Potsdam, NY**

All welcome!



**CHRIST
IS**

RISEN!

Sunday of Thomas (John 20:19-31)

Today’s Gospel account of that first Pascha evening, John 20:19-31, starts with what for those first disciples must’ve been quite a shock: “That same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jewish authorities, Jesus came and stood in the midst and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

It all sounds calm, dignified, ritualized, just as church should always be, right? Well, Luke 24:36-37 supplies a few details John left out: like how, when Jesus “stood in the midst of them, and said them, ‘Peace to you,’” the disciples were anything but calm and dignified; they were freaking out completely, “terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit,” and looking for the nearest ghostbuster. Jesus was dead; they knew He was dead; some of them had seen Jesus stabbed through the side by a Roman spear, to make sure He was dead. And yet here He was in the midst of them, coming through a locked door as if it were but mist. What’s going on?

Well first, let’s notice how our Lord greeted the disciples: not once, but twice He says to them “Peace to you.” Saying it once could’ve been just the ordinary Jewish greeting, “Shalom! Peace!” But twice? No, Jesus isn’t just being polite or conventional; He’s addressing directly the state of mind of the eleven apostles, with special reference to the events of the last few days, and with special reference to their future ministry. When the crunch came, they had failed Him, run away, abandoned Him. But His word to them is “Peace,” not blame; “peace,” not fault-finding; “peace,” not rebuke. Our Lord’s first word to His disciples that first Pascha evening was exactly what they needed to hear and perfectly consistent with why Jesus came in the first place. After all, what was it the angels sang the night of His birth? “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” Peace with God and among people, was a frequent message Christ preached for three years. In Matthew 5:9 our Lord teaches, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.” As we see in John 14:27, it was peace, not riches, that was the legacy Jesus left to the eleven the night before His crucifixion: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.” And later, in reflecting upon the meaning of Christ’s death and Resurrection, the Apostle says in Romans 4:25-5:1 that Jesus “was delivered up because of our offenses and was raised up because of our justification [our being put right with God]. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Clearly, then, the proclamation of peace with God and the making of peace between people is intended by our Lord to be central to Christian faith and Christian servant-hood. Peace between God and us through the precious blood of atonement, and peace between person and person through the outpouring of God’s grace and love into us: to live and share and spread this peace is the work of the Church. And let’s be clear: any religion which makes converts with the sword is not from above, but from beneath. Any form of Christianity which burns people at the stake or chops off their fingers and toes one joint at a time, as was done to St. Peter the Aleut., in order to promote its own success, carries in itself the stamp and stench of apostasy. That religion is the truest and best which does the most to spread real, true peace. So how true is your faith and mine? How committed are we to living, sharing, and spreading that “peace of God which passes all understanding”?

Now secondly, note the remarkable evidence which our Lord supplied of His own resurrection. He gently appealed to the senses of His shaking disciples when “He showed them His hands and His side,” still bearing the holes made by spike and spear. And, adds Luke 24:39, He urged them to trust their own senses: “Behold, My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.” And when “they still did not believe for joy and marveled,” He ate in front of them what they had at hand, making the point that ghosts don’t eat. How absolutely wonderful that the risen and victorious Jesus would be gentle enough to meet the feeble faith of His confused apostles!

But also wonderful is the principle which He established for the use of His Church in every age, until He returns: the principle that faith is not totally blind but is grown in us by the Holy Spirit through our senses and our reason. Consider how, in Romans 1:20 St. Paul applies that principle in arguing that both our sense and our reason lead us to realize that God exists: “For since the creation of the world, His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”

And at root, isn’t living by that principle exactly what Thomas is doing when he says, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe”? Thomas says “No!” to utterly blind faith. Reason tells him that the dead don’t come back; and his senses have not received the same evidence the others had received. Admittedly, by failing to gather together with the others, Thomas missed out on our Lord’s presence on Pascha; and that was Thomas’s fault. But he still needs and insists on receiving the same evidence the others had gotten: a real, personal, physical encounter with the risen Jesus. And thank God for his stubbornness! During Vespers last evening we called Thomas’s doubt “beautiful.” Why? It’s because of Thomas’s refusal to buy into blind faith that we have his experience and testimony to prove the reality of the Resurrection...

...And a demonstration of how kind and merciful Christ is to struggling believers. Were the other disciples irked, especially when Thomas in effect called them all liars and he doggedly declared, “Unless I see with my own eyes and touch with my own hands, I will not believe”? Probably. But Jesus wasn’t irked; He didn’t reject Thomas. Rather, He came again a week later, apparently especially for Thomas and gently said: “Reach your finger here, and look at my hands; and reach your hand here, and put it into my side.” And if we think Jesus will not be as gentle and patient with us when we too are honestly struggling with questions and doubts, we don’t yet know Him Who is “meek and humble of heart,” and Who accepts the anguished cry of “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” as enough and more than enough.

Faith does not demand a lobotomy; God gave us eyes to see and brains to think, and expects us to use them. For example: to believe that someone has within themselves the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit, when our eyes tell us they’re living in habitual carelessness and sin, is just dumb. Not that our senses and our reason are the ultimate arbiters of truth; they’re not. Our senses and our reason tell us that the bread and wine in Holy Communion are only bread and wine. But because I have come to know Who Jesus is, and because I have seen in my mind’s eye and understood with my own brain how “when I was still without strength, at the right time Christ died for me, one of the ungodly,” and because by faith I have come to be in relationship with Him and have come to trust Him, I now simply take Him at His word when He says “This is My body...this is My blood.”

Thirdly, let’s note and be thankful for the remarkable commission our Lord conferred upon His apostles: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone’s sins, they are retained.” In sending out His apostles to go into all the world, and preach the Gospel as He had preached it, He also delegated to them, and through them to His Church, His own power to forgive sin. And in 1 Timothy 5:22 we see St. Paul teaching young Bishop Timothy how not to use that power. Referring not to ordination, but to the laying-on of hands that has accompanied absolution from the earliest times, Paul warns, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people’s sin; keep yourself pure.” To pronounce absolution too quickly and easily, without securing some sort of indication of genuine repentance from the penitent, is to share in that person’s sins. But there is no higher honor being Christ’s ambassador, and proclaiming in Christ’s name the forgiveness of sins to a lost world; and there is no greater joy than in knowing in the depths of one’s soul that in and through this Mystery of Repentance, God always honors His promise in 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

