

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

by Donald H. Juel

At the center of your group, open a bible, light a candle beside it, and place alongside Easter symbols such as Easter eggs or an Easter lily.

LEADER: God spoke this word, “Let there be light.”

ALL: And there was light, evening and morning, the first day of creation.

LEADER: In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.

ALL: And the Word was God.

LEADER: The Holy One says, My word will not come back to me empty.

ALL: It will accomplish God’s purpose.

LEADER: Just as rain and snow come down from heaven

ALL: And do not return until they have watered the earth,

LEADER: Making Earth bring forth and sprout,

ALL: Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

LEADER: So shall God’s word succeed, that goes forth from God’s mouth.

ALL: God’s word will not come back empty.

LEADER: What has come into being in Jesus Christ is life.

ALL: His life is light to us and all people. Amen. Alleluia.



We know the healing power of words, for example, how “I love you” can change the course of a life. We know how “I forgive you” or “I’m sorry” can change the atmosphere. We know the power of encouraging words like the four sentences Armand Gamache, the Québécois detective in the Louise Penny mysteries, teaches his recruits.

I’m sorry.

I don’t know.

I need help.

I was wrong.

Most of us have spoken words we wish we hadn’t. The experience can teach us a costly lesson: words have power. They do not just contain meaning; they create meaning.

When teachers manipulate students by shaming those who do not have the right answers, they can destroy their students’ imaginations. Children whose parents repeatedly tell them how stupid they are can come to believe it.

Gossip without any basis in fact can destroy the reputation of a public figure. Once hateful words find a home in people’s minds, they are difficult to drive out. Once spoken, words live on.

John’s gospel tells of a Word from beyond our world and our experience that became flesh, a Word death could not silence. The Word continues among us in Jesus’ story and in words spoken in his name, words ready to awaken and sustain faith. If all Jesus promises is true, everything depends upon knowing the Word—and speaking it.

● **What is an unforgettable word someone has spoken in your life?**

GOSPEL

Jesus empowers his disciples.

NARRATOR: On the evening of the first day of the week, even though the disciples had locked the doors of the place where they were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood before them.

JESUS: Peace be with you.

NARRATOR: When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. At the sight of Jesus the disciples rejoiced.

JESUS: Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

NARRATOR: Then Jesus breathed on them.

JESUS: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive people's sins, they are forgiven them; if you hold them bound, they are held bound.

NARRATOR: It happened that one of the twelve, Thomas (the name means *twin*), was absent when Jesus came.

OTHER DISCIPLES: We have seen the Lord!

THOMAS: I'll never believe it without probing the nail-prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail-marks and my hand into his side.

NARRATOR: A week later the disciples were once more in



the room. This time Thomas was there with them. Despite the locked doors, Jesus came and stood before them.

JESUS: Peace be with you. Thomas, take your finger and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe!

THOMAS: My Lord and my God!

JESUS: You became a believer because you saw me. Blessed are they who have not seen and have believed.

NARRATOR: Jesus performed many other signs as well—signs not recorded here—in the presence of his disciples. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name.

John 20.19-31



Blessed are we who hear and believe.

As the Christian community continues to read the Easter stories from John's gospel on this Sunday, the focus shifts

from Mary Magdalene to the whole company of Jesus' disciples and the one among them who doubts, Thomas. Early in the morning Mary

Magdalene is the first to find the empty tomb, then the first to see Jesus, the first to recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd as he calls her name.

Mary Magdalene returns to the company of Jesus' friends to announce, "I have seen the Lord." The gospel does not tell us their reaction, only that in the evening of the same day, the risen Jesus appears to the community of his disciples who gather in fear behind locked doors.

Peter must be in the group. He saw Jesus' tomb empty with the burial wrappings carefully folded but left the tomb without believing. A seed of hope from Jesus' teachings may be awakening in him, mixing with feelings of shame and regret at denying his friend during Jesus' passion.

Fear that what happened to Jesus will happen to them has caused the community to lock the doors. How do they get their minds around their grief, the terror, and Mary Magdalene's witness that she has seen the Lord? In locking out threats, they have locked themselves in together.

● What does your community of faith lock out and lock in?

The risen Jesus enters their midst with two gifts—peace and new life. The sight of Jesus and his greeting of peace bring the community joy. These first disciples find the risen Jesus with them as Christians do to this day when they gather in his name.

Jesus breathes the new life of the Spirit upon his disciples, just as in the beginning God breathed the spirit of life into the first creatures in Genesis 2.7. The new life Jesus' Spirit inspires is forgiveness.

The peace and forgiveness the risen Jesus and his Spirit bring the community become their commission. Jesus sends the community to make the lives of others whole as he has made their lives new and whole. The grain of wheat has germinated and Jesus' spirit will multiply a hundredfold as the men and women of this small company continue his mission.

● **When have you experienced Jesus' peace and presence?**

● **When have you found new life in forgiving or being forgiven?**

The final part of the gospel focuses on Thomas, an intriguing character because he doubts as contemporary people do. The gospel tells us that he is not with the rest when Jesus appears but doesn't explain why. The testimony of those who saw Jesus leaves Thomas unimpressed. He will not easily be persuaded. "Unless I can stick my fingers in the nail holes and poke my hand into the spear wound, I won't believe it's really Jesus."

When Jesus appears again, his response to Thomas is remarkably, unexpectedly gentle. "Go ahead," he says. "Poke away. If this is what it takes for you to believe, I'm at your disposal." Like a child, Thomas wants to



touch and feel. And Jesus is not the least embarrassed at such childlike needs. The one who gave his life for the world will not withhold himself from the curious.

Thomas is overwhelmed and responds with a confession that soars above any made in the New Testament: "My Lord and my God." Thomas understands finally Jesus' response to his earlier request to see the Father. "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14.9).

● **When have you questioned as Thomas does?**

● **Where did your questioning lead?**

The gospel cannot end with Thomas's confession. He and the other disciples believe because they can see and touch Jesus. How do we later generations come to faith, we who are unable to touch the nail holes in Jesus' hands or the wound in his side?

God is available in the Word. The Word has become flesh not only in the person of Jesus but in the story about him and in words

spoken in his name. Sunday's gospel concludes by expressing the reason for the writing of the gospel stories. "These have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, so that through this faith you may have life in his name" (John 20.31).

The gospels do much more than preserve precious information about Jesus. The evangelists write to hand on to future generations the testimony of the earliest believers. John wants to persuade us that the God who breathed life into the first human is the God who raised up Jesus from the dead.

The God who creates is the God who comes among us in Jesus to save, heal, forgive, and make whole. Jesus continues to live among us in the gospel story, which calls us to hear and believe what we can no longer see and believe.

The Church testifies that the words of John's gospel can be trusted: these very words awaken and sustain faith for us no less than for Thomas and Mary Magdalene and the rest of Jesus' followers. That is why we listen to them spoken to us again and again—and why we must speak them to others. Words do things. They give the gift of life.

● **What gospel story or saying makes Jesus present and available to you?**

● **What words of testimony persuade you to believe in Jesus?**

● **What words make a difference in our world?**

The Easter word creates a community.

Throughout the Easter season, the Church reads passages from Luke’s book, the Acts of the Apostles. In Acts 2, the Spirit comes upon the community of Jesus’ disciples and sets their tongues afire. Peter gives a fiery sermon that concludes “God has made both Lord and Messiah this Jesus whom you crucified” (2.36). This is the same word Thomas speaks, “My Lord and my God.”

Peter’s sermon demonstrates what words can do. His preaching cuts his audience to the heart; thousands confess their sins and are baptized in the name of Jesus.

Those sent forth by the Spirit with fiery tongues bear witness to Jesus’ resurrection throughout Acts. Sunday’s first reading describes another effect of their words. The

Easter word that Jesus is risen creates community. The Christians in Jerusalem form a community of one heart and mind. Believers hold their goods in common and distribute goods justly, according to people’s need.

That the good news of Easter can constitute just and loving community is one proof in every age the good news is true. Now, as then, words—words about Jesus, spoken in Jesus’ name—change lives and “turn the world upside down” (Acts 17.6).

One mind, one heart

The community of believers were of one heart and one mind. None of them ever claimed anything as his or her own; rather, everything was held in common. With power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great respect was paid to them all; nor was there anyone needy among them, for all who owned property or houses sold them and donated the proceeds. They used to lay them at the feet of the apostles to be distributed to everyone according to his or her need.

Acts of the Apostles 4:32-35

● How does the Christian community today make God present in the world?

● How do you test that Christianity is real?

PRAY

Sing “O Sons and Daughters;” its text comes from Sunday’s gospel, John 20.

Refrain: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

*That night the disciples met in fear;
Amidst them came their Lord most dear,
And said, “My peace be on all here.”*
Alleluia. **Refrain.**

*When Thomas first the tidings heard,
How they had seen the risen Lord,
He doubted the disciples’ word.*
Alleluia. **Refrain.**

*“My wounded sides, O Thomas see;
Behold my hands, my feet,” said he,
Not faithless but believing be.”*
Alleluia. **Refrain.**

*No longer Thomas then denied,
He saw the feet, the hands, the side;
“You are my Lord and God,” he cried.*
Alleluia. **Refrain, Refrain.**

Take turns naming people for whom you wish Jesus’ Easter peace. After each name, say:
ALL: Peace be with you.



Before his death Donald H. Juel, Ph.D., was a minister of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and a professor of New Testament at Princeton Seminary, Princeton NJ.

DO SOMETHING



● Start a tradition of service as a group or family in the spirit of Easter joy. Many couples, parish groups, or sets of parents and children serve meals regularly at Loaves and Fishes programs or homeless shelters, or stock food shelves. Helping in such programs awakens servers to needs in their neighborhoods.

CONTINUE CELEBRATING EASTER by taking time to pray. These two books have short easy-to-use chapters to get you going.
View sample pages at goodgroundpress.com.

