**Christ’s appearance to Thomas**. B Holwerda

Singing: Ps 61 vs. 4&5 / Hymn 1 vs. 9 / Ps21 vs.2&3 / Ps 21 vs. 4 / Ps 118 vs. 8

Reading: John 20: 1-10, 19-23

Text: John 20: 24-29

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ,

A week ago we celebrated Easter.

The feast of Easter. Probably no one will object to this expression when I use it. However we must realize that the use of this term is somewhat questionable.

Because when we say that we celebrate Easter we create the impression that this is a Sunday whose value and meaning is superior to all the other Sundays. As if the monotonous routine and the exhausting cycle of the “ordinary” Sundays are set aside momentarily, and we are lifted to the festive heights of an extraordinary Sunday. As if a festive meal was prepared in the Church to which the menu of the other Sundays could not be compared.

In our understanding, then, everything remains connected to the word “feast”. Whoever celebrates a feast wants to wear a different robe because it is not an ordinary day. He eats what he never or hardly ever eats, and drinks the sparkling wine saved only for special occasions.

That special flavor is also attached to the word “feast of Easter”, an extraordinarily bright day of very special joy. If we want to celebrate in this way we would climb out of the valley of ordinary church joy up to the summit of extra-ordinary church happiness.

But that is not how it should be! For the church, - which is not simply a congregation who on rare occasions eats of the Easter gospel and drinks the new Easter wine, but the church that lives from the reality of salvation each day. That joyfully celebrates the memory of the resurrection every Sunday and so experiences the power of the resurrection every Sunday. It does this not as John and Simon Peter and Mary Magdalene and the travelers to Emmaus did on the first Easter Sunday but as the congregation filled with the Spirit of Pentecost!

So you should not say: the other Sundays are just ordinary Sundays but on Easter Sunday we celebrate the festivity of that first Easter Sunday. We do not climb out of the “common” to reach the top of a shining Easter summit, because every Sunday we look down from an even higher Pentecost to all that is below us.

Do we celebrate Easter? No, we look at Easter as something which is behind us and long ago. We have no extra-ordinary joy but have the joy of every Sunday, that is the joy of Pentecost. It is this; our greatest happiness lies in the fact that the festal joy is not extraordinary but the norm. That the rejoicing we had last Sunday, that we have today or will have next Sunday as well, can no longer be the Christmas joy or the Easter joy because now each Sunday we experience the continuation of Pentecost. Every Sunday we are strengthened by the fact that we have reached the highest point of these feasts and that there is only one thing better that is still to come; the eternal perfection of joy and love at God’s right hand.

But Easter is not lessened by this. Because looking to the past means more than looking forward.

If you are engaged then you anticipate your marriage and dream the sweetest dreams, and you have only a vague expectation of an unknown future. But when you celebrate your silver anniversary then you remember your marriage day and realize the depth, the riches and the meaning of it.

So it is also with Easter. When the church was still waiting, it did so in ignorance, and when Easter came the disciples could not cope with it so easily. Then Pentecost came and that age has lasted more than nineteen centuries and each year anew the church receives a better understanding of what Easter means. What could not be absorbed in one day is slowly revealed to the church more and more over many centuries. We will thank God for this forever.

So today, as Pentecost congregation, we will listen to the gospel of Easter. I declare to you the Word of the risen Christ who shows himself to Thomas as God revealed in the flesh

 *1) great is the mystery if Christmas*

 *2) greater the mystery of Easter*

 *3) greatest is the mystery of Pentecost.*

**ONE**

“And Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came there.” It certainly earns our attention that Thomas appears before us in a special quality, for he was called “one of the twelve”.

For we always have the tendency to speak of the “Christian” Thomas. We make all kinds of observations about his character, his soul, his pessimism. For in the Church Thomas has slowly become the brooding worrier; a dark melancholy nature that cannot come to believe.

But John presents Thomas here as ‘one of the twelve’. That is to say he does not come to our attention as a man with a peculiar state of mind, not as a Christian with certain difficulties in his faith, but as an Apostle in his very particular office.

I can imagine that for many the text may lose its luster in this context because we really like to see the ‘personal element’ in the preaching. And when we now have a text that appears to have many points that might fit this personal application it must be a disappointment that with this part of scripture we go in the direction of ‘the office’.

But we are bound to scripture when it mentions Thomas in his office as Apostle.

So must we now come up with the idea that the ‘personal’ must be set aside? On the contrary! John assures us at the end of the chapter that these things are written that *we* might believe and that believing *we* would have life in the name of Christ, the Easter Regent. John has written to us about the apostle Thomas so that we would personally believe and have life!

Now the evangelist tells us that this apostle Thomas was absent on the first Sunday evening when Jesus showed Himself to His disciples.

You know what was written in the gospel about this gathering without Thomas and also what the purpose was of Jesus’ appearance there.

It is expected perhaps that Jesus showed Himself to specific persons, to the women, to Mary Magdalene, the travelers from Emmaus on that first Easter. But He did not reveal Himself to those whom we would expect Him to show Himself to first. He did not go to the *Twelve!* These were closest to the Savior and he had even praised them for staying with Him in His suffering. He had decreed to them the Kingdom and told them that they would sit on twelve thrones judging the twelve tribes off Israel.

Ask yourself: is it not strange that on Easter Christ passes them by and goes to the women first? The twelve were present at all the main events of Christ’s ministry. A few times he had even taken three of them separately, for example when he was glorified on the mountain, or also when he was hard pressed and sorely afraid in Gethsemane. But it is strange that he leaves the Twelve behind when He visits the other disciples at Easter!

Yet it is not strange when you are aware who these Twelve are. They are not mere disciples, beloved, but they are the twelve apostles, the foundation upon which Christ wants to build His church. They have to see, hear and taste the Word of life, because on the testimony of these ear and eyewitnesses the faith of the whole church will be grounded. Not on the testimony of each one individually but on the testimony of “The Twelve”, the one closed circle of apostles.

When you realize this you understand why Christ did not show Himself to each one individually because for *Him* they are the office bearers. He can only reveal Himself to them when they are together in the apostolic gathering.

Therefore He said to the women: tell this to my disciples. He does not leave the women to quietly sit in contemplation, but sends them to the disciples. He convenes the council of Apostles through the women.

And when they gather on Sunday evening as ‘The Twelve’ He appears in their midst. He breathes on them, sends the Holy Spirit among them and gives them the power to do the church gathering work in His name. He gives the authority to forgive or to not forgive sins. Because from now on the work of forgiveness and judgment, the administration of the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven will take place not by Christ personally but by ‘The Twelve’ whom he has predestined for this long ago.

On that Sunday evening there was a great leap forward in the history of the church. At that moment the official administration of the apostles as representatives of Jesus Christ begins! The work of forgiving sins or not forgiving sins continues but from now on in a different form, now through the apostolic service.

But Thomas was not present at that meeting. That was too bad, not for Thomas personally, although that naturally was bad too, but it was a terrible thing for the church, for you and for me. Your faith and mine must rest on the unanimous testimony of “The Twelve”, including the testimony of Thomas. What will come of the church and what will the end be of your faith and mine without Thomas’s concurring witness? What would happen if all the others would claim the Lord has truly risen, we saw and touched Him but Thomas would say I don’t believe a word of it? The whole church will run aground if the testimony of the Twelve concerning the reality of Easter is not unanimous and my faith and yours will become shipwrecked. That is how much I am personally tied to the apostle Thomas.

Now that it is so personal, now that my faith stands or falls on Christ’s appearance to Thomas, I no longer have to make it personal. It is already personal for it is a matter of life and death for everyone.

Therefore we don’t have to make it a matter of personality as to why Thomas was not there. People want to divert us by his character, by his supposed melancholy. Beloved we do not really know much about that.

Those psychologists and others like them who express their opinions about this, can argue skillfully, but what is peculiar is that they diametrically contradict each other. One expounds Thomas’s melancholy, his anxious nature, one who had great difficulty in coming to belief. Another meanwhile assures us that Thomas was a sober critic, the intellectual who with his astute critical thinking could not accept the fact of the resurrection. Against this the third calls Thomas heroic, a man not easily shaken, one of much energy and with large stature. But we really know nothing of all this.

The only thing we do know is that Thomas, just as well as the others, heard the message the women brought that Jesus was alive. Nevertheless he still did not come to the gathering. He could not believe it!

Because we know from the gospel that Thomas struggled with the problem of Easter more then any other apostle. Not just at the time of Easter but already before that.

Read the gospel for a moment.

We meet Thomas for the first time in John 11, at the occasion of the raising of Lazarus. When Jesus tells his disciples that He wants to go to Bethany Thomas became greatly concerned. Indeed the other disciples felt the same because they know it is dangerous in Judea. Only just recently the Jews had wanted to kill Jesus. So they fear the worst when Jesus makes plans to return there.

But when Jesus is determined to go and the other disciples continue to protest Thomas says *“let us go with Him so we may also perish with Him“.* Also Thomas concludes that this trip must be the last ill fated journey. Yet he remains true to the end; he is willing to perish with his Lord. Death, according to Thomas, is the end of the messianic act. Thomas’s dictionary does not contain the word `resurrection`.

At the night of Easter it is again Thomas who opens his mouth. Jesus tells His disciples: do not let your heart be disturbed. For now it comes: this death that the disciples thought would be the end. Your heart should not be disturbed: you believe in God, you believe that He causes His Kingdom to come. Believe in Me also: believe in Me as you believe in God! Where I go you know and the road you know also. I have told you before of death and resurrection, you know all about it now. Believe Me in all this as your God, because whoever has seen Me has seen the Father. Again it is Thomas who says: *“Lord we don’t know where You are going and how could we know the way“*. He did not recognize the way of suffering and death, he could not accept that. He can not believe it even though Jesus has told them. Yes he believes Jesus but he does not believe in Him like he believes in God.

Thomas could not believe that Jesus must pass through death and that by death everything will truly turn out well. He did not see the appearance of the resurrection behind death.

Why could he not believe it? Because he honors Him as his Lord but he does not yet accept Him as his God.

The background of Thomas’s doubt with Easter is this: he did not understand the mystery of Christmas. That God was manifested in the flesh; that the man Jesus is simultaneously God, and valued above everything in all eternity. Thomas does not understand the secret of Christmas: so for him Easter is an impossibility. When the women come to tell them: the Lord has truly risen and we have seen Him. Then Thomas says to himself: *impossible. If that were true then He would not only have to be my Lord but also my God.*

Thomas has to deal with the riddle of the two natures. On Easter he sits brooding over the Christmas fact: who is Jesus, is He man or God and man. That last is too high for him.

Even if the other disciples say to him after that Sunday evening: *we have seen Him*, Thomas restrains himself by saying it is impossible. If I don’t see it myself, if I don’t touch Him and if I don’t feel the scars of the nails with my hands I won’t believe it. Never! Because to rise up He would have to be God and that I can’t believe.

Indeed, Thomas is far gone if he gives up his faith. He has clearly seen what Easter signified, probably more clearly then the others even. He sees much more then Mary Magdalene for example.

Before Good Friday Mary called Him her Lord, and after Good Friday he remains that for her for she had said: they have taken my Lord away. When she again recognizes Jesus she rejoices, *Rabboni my Lord*! For her Jesus remained the same, she wants to embrace Him and also after Easter to continue the relationship on the same footing as before.

However Thomas understood that that would not do. Before Good Friday Jesus was the Lord for him just as well as for the others. But after Good Friday things have changed. It is one of the two: Jesus rises up, but then He is not only Lord but also God. Or He does not rise up, and He is not God but He is no longer Lord either. He is both after Good Friday or He is neither. Lord and God, or not God but then also no longer Lord.

That was the struggle for Thomas in that dark week; everything hung in the balance for him. He cannot believe in Jesus as God. But then at the same time he loses Him as Lord.

Thomas has touched the mystery of the Word becoming flesh, and trembled greatly. After Easter Mary said everything remains the same! She does not think of the meaning of Easter and the secret of Christmas does not affect her at all. But Thomas says everything is changed! Easter will expose the secret of Christmas and point out that he is not only man but also God: or the birth is foolishness.

Thomas knows now it will go on or it will falter. Now it will be shown that He is God and that Christmas makes sense, or it will be disproved and then Christmas is nonsense. Now I will win everything: Easter will reveal to me the wonder of Christmas. Or Easter does not come and Christmas is lost to me. His human nature conquers death because He is God then it all makes sense. Or His human nature remains in death and all is foolishness. Something has been added: from now on I must call Him God or it has been removed and I can no longer call Him Lord.

Here you have the angst of Thomas: he cannot accept Him as God, even though He had said: who has seen me has seen the Father. Thomas cannot believe that, but he will not abandon Him as Lord. Yet he has seen it clearly, the one is contained in the other. He is both or he is neither.

We would say that in such an irresolvable conflict the Lord would not leave him to himself. He appears to the women, He dries the tears of Mary Magdalene. Surely He will go with haste to show Thomas that He is both, his Lord and his God. But no, He leaves to Thomas wait for a whole week.

For Thomas it becomes a dark week of fear and anxiety. We would take any minister to task for showing so little interest for the needs of the sheep, and rightly so! Every church member should be able to be visited at a moments notice.

But Thomas is an apostle! He must be straightened out as an office bearer. That is why Christ waits till the next Sunday when the council of the apostles meets again. Christ wants to gather his congregation and to build it upon the foundation of the apostles: the church foundation has to be restored because a crack has appeared! Because of Thomas! It had to happen at the place and at the time preordained by God: in the lawful meeting of “the Twelve”. Thomas had abandoned the society of those ‘Twelve’. He had to be reinstalled into that circle by Christ, but that can only happen on the day when the group meets according to the will of Christ.

That was the great thing about the first Sunday, that Christ started to gather His church anew then. Up until now the disciples had always had their rest day on Saturday, and no one had expected that the Sunday would be preeminent. But Christ showed up in their midst and anointed the office bearers with the Spirit. Then they understood that the Old Testament worship service, also in its timing, was replaced by the New Testament; that now the day of congregating would be the Sunday.

That is why they were together again on the next Sunday according to the ordinance of their Lord and they spoke of it from now on as the” day of the Lord”.

This time Thomas was there too. He could not believe, but if something was going to happen it would happen today! If Christ was really alive then He would continue the work of church gathering that He had started the last Sunday.

On that second Sunday too, Christ really appeared. In that appearance He confirmed that Sunday is the day of the gathering of the church. Through His resurrection he has made the Sunday into a feast day and immediately laid the foundation of the church through the apostles. From now on, He will build the congregation on that foundation every Sunday.

Did we understand beloved?

In the dark days of the Second World War many have expressed astonishment because of the fact that the churches were not fuller. In the previous war it was quite different they said, people streamed into church then. But you should not be amazed.

Disaster converts no one; people may flee to the church because of fear especially if there is a chance that the catastrophe might yet pass. Then people will pray in large numbers, who knows, it might help. A catastrophe converts no one into recognizing the Sunday and the church service: because disaster brings no one to an Easter faith; to the confession “my Lord and my God”!

That war does not fill the churches is not so bad: but that the gospel of Easter, also confirmed from now on by the testimony of Thomas, does not fill the churches; that is bad! For that shows that the congregation does not honor Christ in His church gathering work; that they recite the confession of Thomas with their mouth but not with their deeds and so not with their heart.

When we believers long for an extra service on the so called Christian feast days but find that one service is sufficient on the true Christian feast day then it is evident that Easter has made no impact on us. We no longer have an eye for the Easter style of Christ and have denied His Easter rights.

If you truly celebrate Easter then you do not swear by a service on Easter Monday but you never leave your place empty on Sunday and you teach the same to your children.

Thomas had a difficult week but Christ had put this onto him because He gathers His church on Sunday, wanting to see us all there. Then we do not speak of the soul of Thomas, but as far as we are concerned we make his dark week a blessing for us, for by the foundation set by Thomas we have to let ourselves be gathered on the day of the Lord. Then Christ comes to us too via Thomas to fulfill the psalm: *‘I will praise Thee forever in the great congregation’.*

**TWO**

On the second Sunday the situation was the same as on the first.

The disciples were gathered together again. The doors were shut, just as at the first, because it is still always the church under the cross that comes together. The enmity against Jesus reaches the church as well. They crucified Him; they will do it to them too. That is why security procedures had to be taken.

This is how the Easter church starts on her way in history. The shadows of Good Friday hang over her first service and the second one as well, and this remains the same through all the ages until the present day. The church always celebrates Easter with death before her eyes.

But she is comforted indeed because Christ, the power of life, appears in her midst and says peace be unto you! Then death is not removed but the fear of death is overcome by the peace of Christ’s imperishable life.

So He also brings the greeting of peace this time to Thomas who just couldn’t believe. He invites him now to see and feel what he had been told about by the others. In this way he brings Thomas to confess *my God and my Lord!*

That is no impetuous yell of joy, unreasonable and rash. It is not exultation as with Mary; Raboni, my Lord! Mary said it before she understood and she barely knows what she is saying. But Thomas calmly utters a thoughtful confession. When he speaks out: my Lord and my God, he knows what he says, and why he says it.

Mary blurts out hastily: my Lord! Being absorbed in the idea that all will be as before.

But Thomas nods thoughtfully and says: *now it is different than before. By Thy resurrection Thou hast shown Thyself to be God. That is not how I knew Thee before, but I will see Thee that way from now on. Thou art still my Lord. I see Thee standing before me; I touched with my hands saying Thou art the same person I had honored as my Lord before. Therefore today I still say; my Lord! Speak Lord for Thy servant hears*.

*But Thou art also God. Thou hast shown that by Thy resurrection. Thou art my God revealed in the flesh. Thou art the Lord, and says to one: go and he goes and to the other: come and he comes. Speak also to me, for look I am here. But Thou art also God, who raises the dead, who calla for things that are not as though they were. I have seen Thee many times therefore I immediately recognized Thee. However I have only really seen Thee now. I have seen Thee today and I have seen the Father. Thou art my God!*

Thomas did not fall as dead on his feet even though he stood near to his God.

He could not express a single word we would say, but he kept his senses. He was disturbed yet amazingly calm. He did not cover his face, he had no fear, even though – he was the doubter mentioned before don’t forget? – Even while he was standing before his God!

This man had planned to attend the meeting only for a few minutes. He kept shrugging his shoulders; I won’t believe any of your claims if I don’t see Him and never will believe. But when he sees Jesus come in then he says: ‘Thou art my God, *My* God.

Yes, we are often busy with that personal and confident: *My* God.

But do you believe that he is Lord and God? What will you say to Him when he appears *before you*? If He is the Lord doesn’t He have something to say over you? If I believe that wouldn’t I immediately get down on my Knees before Him?

Do you really believe that Easter is past and that Jesus Christ has shown that He is God by His resurrection? Then why do you not call Him: *my* God?

When this resurrected Lord and God comes to you – no, you did not have to have been a believer; not that; perhaps you just walked into the church for a moment without a bit of Easter joy, with unbelief, with a bitter and hopeless heart, and you appeared here so to speak, as godless as a sinner would be. As unbelieving as Thomas; but then this Lord- and-God comes near to you and says to you: I am your God, what will you say then?

Could I argue with my God if He appears to me in His Easter glory and thus makes His Easter right unquestionable?

When he appears to me in the church what else can I say but Thou art my God, I will serve Thee and honor Thy majesty?

Believing is very difficult! Thomas proved that. If Christ does not reveal himself, then we will not get there.

But faith is also very simple. Because Christ the Easter King, Lord-and-God, reveals Himself to me as such! What can I do but confess Him?

You are probably thinking: yes, If He appeared to me as intimately and as closely as Thomas experienced – yes then I would believe.

Do you mean that? Then why don’t you believe, now that He appears much more abundantly and much nearer?

**THREE**

Christ has taken care for the continuation of Easter. He said to Thomas: because you have seen Me therefore you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.

Do you understand what is being said? It is a *blessing*. Remember then that other blessing that looks so much like this one.

One day when Christ revealed himself to the disciples as the Son, who knows the Father and is Himself only known by the Father, then he said to them: blessed are the eyes who see what you see; because I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you have witnessed and have not seen it.

That means this: blessed are you, disciples that you might see what the prophets of the Old Testament have desired in vain to see.

But on Easter he adds to the first blessing a second one. Blessed, Thomas, are those who no longer see what you see! Blessed are those for whom it is not necessary to see in order to come to faith!

This seeing of the disciples saw and also of Thomas on Easter, is more than all of the words of the prophets combined. Yet it is still less than the faith that does not need to see, that simply rests on the testimony of the apostles and the prophets! That depends on the seeing of others and therefore has no desire to see.

Thomas you are blessed because you see the reality of the resurrection, and the prophets have desired that seeing in vain. Easter is more than the prophecy of the Old Testament. Yet you are poor Thomas because it was necessary for you to see! The Word was not sufficient for you!

Therefore they are blessed who have not seen and experienced the reality of Easter as you have seen it, and who yet believe it.

Blessed are those who will believe in Me as Lord and God through your word. Yes I say to you, they are blessed because they are brought to faith by the Spirit of Pentecost without seeing.

Seeing is better than the unfulfilled longing to see! The reality of the resurrection is better than the prophecy of the resurrection! But seeing is less than the blessedness wherein the necessity of seeing has become unnecessary, because the Spirit leads to faith without seeing.

Thomas had to see for otherwise he could not believe. Today we have not seen anything; we have only heard an Easter sermon.

The Spirit of Pentecost was in church here and Pentecost is more than Easter!

Christ revealed Himself to Thomas with many signs for the eye. Should we therefore say that Thomas was blessed?

No we won’t do that because Christ has proclaimed us blessed who have not seen and yet believe.

Christ has shown Himself here in the church but only via the apostolic word, but He revealed Himself in the power of the Spirit! What our eye has not seen today we have heard with our ear and believed by our heart without seeing.

You want to believe don’t you? If only you had a vision in the style of Thomas? Well now, Christ has been better shown to you today. He has come with the Easter gospel, and has come in the Spirit of Pentecost!

What should we say then? We allow ourselves to be declared blessed by Him. He has greeted us today as he had greeted Thomas: grace and peace unto you. But beyond that He has treated us as church of Pentecost; we only get a sermon. He has said blessed are those for whom a sermon is sufficient, for whom the phase of visually beholding Easter is past.

Look, here am I, your Lord and your God; look here I am in the Word that is administered to you. We want to kneel before Him, and make our Easter confession as church of Pentecost, stirred up and yet amazingly calm: my Lord and my God.

So these three remain; Christmas, Easter and Pentecost. The greatest of these three must be: Pentecost!

**Amen.**