

Our reading from Acts chapter 5 this morning takes place a few weeks after Easter. Jesus has not only risen from the dead, but, by this time, He has also ascended into heaven. The Christian Church is just getting started. The believers are joyful and excited. They gather together in homes to have fellowship and prayer, to listen to the apostles teach them, and to eat meals together. They have sold land and belongings to form a new community called the Church. More and more have been added to their numbers. What an amazing change from the grief-filled days after Jesus had been crucified!

Peter stood tall as the leader of this growing church, along with the apostle John. The two of them had just healed a beggar who could not walk. But the religious leaders did not like what was going on and tried to get them to stop talking about Jesus. They wanted to silence their message that Jesus had risen from the dead. It did not work. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, boldly proclaimed, "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (4:12).

The apostles continued to perform incredible signs and wonders among the people. Can you picture the crowds they began to attract? People would carry the sick out to the streets. Those with unclean spirits were brought to them. Oh, if only Peter would stop and heal them, that the apostles would cast out the evil spirits. In fact, they were hoping that even Peter's shadow would pass over them, that his shadow would make them whole once again. The scene ends with the simple statement: "they were all healed" (v 16).

Now, did Peter's shadow heal the people? It could have! One time, Jesus was traveling in a crowd of people to heal the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, a synagogue ruler. She was dying. Along the way, a woman crept up to Jesus. She had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and no doctor could help her. She just wanted to touch the hem of Jesus' garment. She stretched out her hand. There she touched it. And just like that she was healed on the spot. Maybe Peter's shadow had that same healing power and presence of God for the sick and demon-possessed.

You see, God can be powerfully present in a shadow. When the time came for Jesus to be born, the angel came to Mary to let her know she would give birth to the very Son of God. She was confused because she was a virgin. “How can this be?” she asked. The answer: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Lk 1:35). God overshadowed Mary, and she gave birth to Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Later on in Jesus’ life, He went up a mountain with Peter, James, and John. He was transfigured right before their eyes. Blazing white. Dazzling glory shone around Him. Moses and Elijah appeared there and talked with Jesus. It was incredible! Then a cloud came and overshadowed them. The disciples heard God’s powerful voice boom out, “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to him!” (Lk 9:35).

When God’s shadow appears His very presence and power are in it. Peter’s shadow could have healed the people that day. Not because of any power he had. But because God was there, performing amazing signs and wonders. Even long before Peter walked by that crowd of people, the writer of Psalm 91 knew the wonderful gift of God’s shadow: “He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will abide in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say to the Lord, ‘My refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust’” (Ps 91:1–2).

Now, I know the word *shadow* also has some negative imagery. You walk into church, and the casket is up front, just a few feet from the altar. Your dad took his last breath a few days ago. The time has come to say good-bye. The funeral service begins, and the pastor reads Psalm 23. You listen as the words strike the depths of your soul: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (v 4).

This time, the shadow is not God’s power; this time, it is death’s power over us. This time, the cloud is not the presence of healing and life; this time, the ugly presence of death hangs over you like a cloud of disease and grief. This time, the shadow is not one of joyous excitement; this time, it is one of tear-filled sorrow.

You realize just how quickly life passes by. Another psalm comes to mind: “Man is like a breath; his days are like a passing shadow” (Ps 144:4). You’ve heard it said another way: “The grass withers, the flower fades” (Is 40:7). Your dad’s last few years went by so fast, and you realize how much of your life is already gone by. Like a passing shadow, you cannot help but feel life slipping away. Now the shadow is dark and ominous. You don’t want to be under this shadow. Not for long. No, you long for the shadow of God’s healing presence in your life.

What changes the shadow of death into the shadow of God’s presence in your life? Perhaps a comic by Johnny Hart can answer that question. Johnny Hart was a dedicated Christian who drew a comic strip called B.C., where the characters are from the caveman era. On major holidays, he would often draw a comic that witnessed to his faith. He died in 2007. For Easter 1999, he beautifully spoke of what Jesus’ resurrection meant to him, and for others. A cavewoman watches a caveman tie a rope around two sticks to form a cross on a hill. She asks if he’s building his new Easter model. He says it’s part of it, and that the sticks represent God. Then the two of them walk a long ways away from the cross, creating a set of footprints. He says the two of them will represent Adam and Eve. The Bible verses at the end of the footprints are Mark 10:26–27 and Mark 11:22. I looked it up and the first one reads: [26 (the disciples) said to (Jesus), “Then who can be saved?” 27 Jesus looked at them and said, “With man it is impossible, but not with God. For all things are possible with God.”] and the second passage is where Jesus says, “Have faith in God.” Back to the comic strip. The two characters here turn around. The woman sees just how far away they are from God and asks if God hates them. The man assures her that, no, He is a God of love. She then admits that they rejected him. He assures her that God will still always reach out to them. Next comes a cute comment from Eve that asks if God is into collectibles. Adam excitedly replies that he is—and invites her to watch the sun shine on the cross. The sun is slowly rising behind the cross and a shadow appears. Eve asks if it’s the S-O-N, His Son. Adam smiles and tells her that’s good. The shadow gets closer to them until it covers both of them. They are standing on the shadow of the crossbeam drawn in Lenten purple. Adam says he

stands corrected, and the empty cross sits in the center of the sun.

<https://www.facebook.com/BCcomic/posts/a-favorite-johnny-easter-sunday-from-1999/10151231705464978/>

When we stand in the shadow of the empty cross, with Jesus risen from the dead, God's powerful presence chases away the gloom of death. Jesus' resurrection overshadows you with the very promise of life with Him for all eternity. Your dad will live, and so will you. Jesus' resurrection changes everything!

Think of Thomas, the disciple who was missing from the upper room that first Easter morning. He would not believe that Jesus was alive. He heard the news from the other disciples, but not even Peter could convince him of what had happened. He needed to see it for himself. A week later, he's with the other disciples. Perhaps the room is fairly dark, with just a few lamps for light. Suddenly, Jesus appears in His glorious, resurrected body. Thomas is awestruck. Jesus turns His attention to him. Maybe, just maybe, Jesus is standing before one of the lamps, and his shadow falls over Thomas. He tells Thomas, "Touch my hands and side. Stop your gloomy doubts; start believing again." That very moment the shadow of death turned into the shadow of life. Thomas was whole again. The very resurrected presence of Jesus made all the difference in his life.

And ours too. Now, we can't reach out and touch the nail marks in Jesus' hands and side like Thomas did. We don't have Peter's shadow passing over us with God's healing presence and power, like the crowds did. But we can reach out with our hands to take hold of the risen body of Christ in the bread at His Supper. We reach out to hold steady a cup filled with his blood, powerfully present for us once again. At our Lamb's high feast, we find Easter triumph and Easter joy, paradise opened, and light and life for all our days.

The shadow of gloom and death is changed to the shadow of God's power and life with Christ's resurrected presence in our lives. Can you see this shadow? Well, not like the people who watched Peter walk by. Not like Thomas did when Jesus appeared again. But believe it's here. Believe that God's amazing power and presence is here for you. Listen to Jesus' words to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed" (Jn 20:29). Jesus is talking about you! Amen.

Dylan, Kole, Ella, Madison, Aaron, Lizzy, Nick, Matthew, Parker, Dominic, Grady, Maelee, Riely, Hayden, Garrett, Beth, and Nevaeh: You made it! Well, just about made it. You have survived Public Review last Wednesday evening. You answered, by memory, all of the questions I threw at you from the Small Catechism. Now, hopefully you've been able to breathe a little bit easier and you can soak in this morning's service.

In a few moments you will be coming forward to make your promises to remain faithful to your God and Savior for the rest of your life and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through God's Word the Lord promises to bless you. On the day you were baptized, your parents and sponsors came forward and said, "Yes" to all the many blessings that God poured out on you that day- including the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Today, each of you will be coming forward for yourself to say, "Yes!" to the promises of God's love for you in Christ. It's a proud moment for your parents, a proud moment for your baptismal sponsors, a proud moment for your family who have come to witness this special day in your life, it's a proud moment for your church family, all of us here, particularly your confirmation teachers you've had over the years. It's also a proud moment for the Day School teachers and/or Sunday school teachers you've had here at First Lutheran. And one more thing, it is also a proud moment for me. You all have done very well.

What's more, each one of you has many God-given gifts and talents which I've enjoyed seeing in our year of Catechism classes together and I look forward to seeing those gifts blossom within you in the years to come as you fulfill your promises to remain faithful to your Lord. You'll do that by continuing to worship regularly. And I also hope you'll be involved in our youth group program all throughout your upcoming high school years! Parents, please make sure they come!

It's my prayer that you all will hold on to what you have learned in all of your years **SO FAR** of Christian instruction and that you will remain faithful to God by being in His Word and being in worship where He wants to give and keep on giving you the gifts of forgiveness, life, and strength for your faith in Him.

And speaking of faith, I wish I could assure that after you come up front here in a few moments, kneel down before God and confirm your faith in Him that from that moment on no doubts about your faith will ever pop into your minds again. But believe it or not, *every* Christian struggles with questions and doubts at some time or another. We even see how it happened to one of Jesus' closest followers in today's Gospel lesson.

This morning, we're going to look at a part of the Bible where Jesus talks to us about doubt. And we're going to see what the one and only cure for doubt is.

We find the disciples together on Easter evening. Now what typically happens at your house on Easter night? Well, at ours, everyone is pretty well exhausted after a big morning with all the exciting church services, Easter Breakfast, and then afterwards spending all afternoon and evening visiting with family, eating delicious foods, and of course, getting stuffed on chocolate candy, jellybeans, or marshmallow peeps. After all that we are all definitely exhausted and ready for a good night's sleep!

For the disciples in the first century, the atmosphere was a little bit different. They were locked up in a house. They were probably tired, but more than that, they were *afraid*. Just a few days earlier, they had witnessed Jesus put to death, and now people were saying that they saw Him alive! And then suddenly, Jesus stood among them. And everyone was overjoyed! Except for one disciple... Thomas. He wasn't with them that night, and when he came back later and they told him that they saw Jesus alive, he was skeptical.

"I won't believe it," he said. I need to see Jesus with my eyes. I need to touch Jesus' wounds with my hands. I need physical proof. Otherwise, I won't believe.

Why was Thomas so skeptical? You see, Thomas didn't want to get burned again. For 3 years, he had followed Jesus and believed He was the Messiah. But then he saw things and heard things that made him feel like something was not right. He saw Jesus arrested, even though He was all-powerful. He saw Jesus tortured and crucified even though Jesus could raise people from the dead. None of this made any sense to Thomas.

Everything he saw contradicted what he believed. And he wasn't about to go through that again. He needed proof.

Have you ever struggled with doubt? Is Christianity really the right religion? Are all these things I believe about Jesus really true?

What causes doubt? Thomas doubted because of the trials and troubles he witnessed during Jesus' suffering and death. That still is the number one cause of doubt today - trouble, difficulty, hardship that we go through.

It's easy to believe in the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning at church when everything is well, but it's hard to believe when you're in the Emergency Room and your loved one is struggling with health problems. It's easy to believe in Jesus on Easter morning when the instruments are playing so beautifully everyone around you is singing "I Know that My Redeemer Lives" but it's hard to believe when you're surrounded by people who don't believe in anything, and everyone thinks you're foolish for believing in Jesus. When difficulties and hardships enter our lives, faith is tested. We struggle with doubts.

When those doubts arise, what do you do? Where do you go? What's the cure? During the days when the Bible was written - the cure was simple: spend time with the risen Jesus. A week after Thomas first doubted, Jesus appeared to him. He showed Thomas His hands and side, the very wounds Jesus received when He paid for Thomas' sins. Stop doubting and believe, Jesus told him. And just like that, Thomas' doubt went away. "My Lord and my God," he confessed. No more doubting for Thomas. Someone once said, "Those who doubt most, and yet strive to overcome their doubts, turn out to be some of Christ's strongest disciples." That sounds like Thomas.

Today, Jesus wants us to believe without visible proof - "Because you have seen me, you have believed," he said to Thomas. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." He's talking about us in these verses. Not seeing, and yet believing. And so for you and me today - what is the cure for doubt? How can we believe without seeing?

Thomas touched the wounds of Christ. You and I can touch the wounds of Christ every time we receive the Lord's Supper. Thomas was

able to look Jesus in the eye. Today you and I can see Jesus every time we read the Bible or hear His Word preached and taught. And what do we see when we read the Bible, what do we experience when we receive the Lord's Supper? We see a Savior who looks at us with eyes of love. We see a Savior who knows all about our doubts and fears and unanswered questions, and He says to us, "Peace be with you."

"But look at all of my problems," you and I say. "**But** look at My sacrifice for you," **Jesus** says. Here in the Bible, we see a Savior who forgave Thomas for his unbelief, and still today He keeps forgiving us for all the times we also have struggled to believe plus all our other sins that we confess. The Gospel writer John tells us that this right here - the Word - this is the place to go whenever we have doubts: "these are written that you may believe - not have doubts and be skeptical but **believe** - that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name."

Dylan, Kole, Ella, Madison, Aaron, Lizzy, Nick, Matthew, Parker, Dominic, Grady, Maelee, Riely, Hayden, Garrett, Beth, and Nevaeh. You've been taught the Word of God and how we correctly understand it with the help of the Small Catechism. You're ready to make a big step forward in your Christian faith. Throughout your life there will probably come times when you will wonder if God really loves you. During times of struggle and worry, you may even doubt that He cares for you at all. When that happens, you know what to do: Go to the Bible. Listen to His words of forgiveness, grace, and love. Come to the Lord's Supper, and receive the body and blood of the Lord, sacrificed for you. Here is your cure for doubt. Stop doubting and believe. Amen.