

4.11.21 Er2 Not Left Behind

- “Left behind” means different things to different people
 - To people who read the series of “Left Behind” books some years ago, being left behind means that God would take a few people to heaven and leave most of the people of the world behind to go to hell
 - Let me say clearly, that Lutherans, and other mainstream Christian churches never taught this, but the phrase “Left Behind” along with its books and movies made a lot of money, scared a lot of people, and made a teaching that only one wing of the church believes, quite popular
 - But we have also heard the phrase “Left Behind” in another context
 - Some years ago there was “No Child Left Behind” – a federal initiative for education that emphasized testing students, but which had a tendency to reward schools with good test scores, and punish schools with low test scores
 - After years of fighting, “No Child Left Behind” has been succeeded by Every Student Succeeds, which is much more positive, but still, it’s very hard to make every child succeed in school
 - There is yet another context where we hear “Left behind.” In the military, there is the slogan “Leave no man behind”
 - The navy seals have the legacy that in over fifty years, no killed, wounded, or captured member of the seal team has been left behind in combat
 - But as the tragedy of the MIAs from Viet Nam reminds us, despite the best and sometimes heroic efforts, some soldiers ARE left behind
- Today’s reading from the gospel of John does not use the phrase “Left Behind,” but that’s really what today’s story is about
 - Today’s gospel reading is unusual, because today’s story from the Gospel of John is read EVERY year on the second Sunday in the Easter Season
 - Clearly, the church feels that this reading is especially important and is worth being heard every year!

- Today's gospel reading is usually called the story of Doubting Thomas, but to be honest, the heart of this story is not about Thomas' doubts, but rather about the persistence of the risen Christ
- Now the story is simple. On Easter Day the disciples had locked themselves in a room because they were afraid, but Jesus startled them by appearing among them
- There the living Christ greeted them in peace, showed the disciples the wounds that had killed him, and breathed the Holy Spirit upon them – however one disciple, Thomas, was absent that day
- The next week, the disciples were gathered together again, and this time Thomas was with them, and so they were telling Thomas that they had seen the Lord!
- However, Thomas said he would not believe unless he too saw Jesus' nail-pierced hands and his wounded side – and there's the doubt, right?
- But then Jesus appeared again to them, greeted all the disciples in peace, and invited Thomas to touch his wounds, and then Thomas exclaimed, "My Lord and my God!"
- It is true Thomas doubted. It's also true that if we are honest, everyone doubts!
- But what is really important is that THE RISEN CHRIST LOVED THOMAS SO MUCH THAT HE CAME BACK TO MAKE A SPECIAL APPEARANCE TO JUST THIS ONE DOUBTING DISCIPLE
- In this story, Jesus is literally acting out what he said about the Good Shepherd...
 - The Good Shepherd knows and calls his sheep by name (John 10:14)
 - The Good Shepherd does not lose a single person entrusted to him (John 18:9)
 - The Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep (John 10:11)
- And so the crucified Christ who had already laid down his life, now came back SO THAT THOMAS WOULD NOT BE LEFT BEHIND, and so he sought out, found, and called Thomas by name

- Instead of being stuck with the nickname Doubting Thomas, this story is about THOMAS NOT BEING LEFT BEHIND BY CHRIST
- And the relationship between doubt and less than perfect faith, AND being sought out and not left behind is wonderful Good News for us, and Good News for others
 - For us, what a wonderful thing it is to have a crucified and risen Christ who not only sought out Thomas, but who also seeks, and finds, and makes sure that we are not left behind
 - This is grace, a pure gift! This is God's love in action! This is assurance for days when doubts assail us!
 - And this gracious love is what needs to shape what we say about God's love to others
- I do go on Facebook regularly, and even if you don't go on Facebook you probably know that people who are your "friends" can post all kinds of things that you can read,
 - Some of the things that are posted are really nice, some things that are posted are really nasty or toxic, and some things are so disappointing
 - The other day, one of my cousins, who is a skeptic about faith and organized religion, posted this note which sadly she found to be insightful: "Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there." [Vine Deloris, Sioux]
 - "Religion is for those who are afraid of going to hell!" – apparently that's how she sees us – she sees us as scared people, who are captive to a fear-filled religion.
 - But I suspect, that's also how she has experienced the witness of the church – I suspect that she has experienced, or heard people try to scare the hell out of her in order to drag her into the Christian faith
 - And you and I know, that some voices in the Christian family are really good at shouting, and good at threatening, and good at trying to put the fear of hell in people, warning them with an accusing voice and pointing finger that they will get LEFT BEHIND if they don't shape up!
 - But now remember today's gospel story about Thomas the doubter
 - Did Jesus come and yell at Thomas?

- Did Jesus try to scare him?
- Did Jesus threaten him with the fires of hell?
- NO... Jesus loved Thomas, and Jesus made a special effort to include him, in order NOT to leave Thomas behind
- As people who like Thomas realize that the risen Christ loves us, let us not try to threaten, scold, or scare people into the church where God's GRACE AND LOVE is proclaimed even for doubting, imperfect, and sinful people
- Instead, being called and loved by the crucified and risen Lord, let us LOVE other people into faith in Christ who has died, Christ who has risen, and Christ who comes again