



**Easter Sunday**  
*The Collect*

**A**LMIGHTY God, who through thine only-begotten Son Jesus Christ hast overcome death, and opened unto us the gate of everlasting life; We humbly beseech thee that, as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires, so by thy continual help we may bring the same to good effect; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Ghost ever, one God, world without end. *Amen.*

19 Then the 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 Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. 21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained. (John 20:19-23)

24 But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. (John 20:19-24)

I love the poetic beauty and meaning of the Song of Solomon. In chapter 4, verse 12, we read this wonderful description of the Church: A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed. (Song 4:12) Of course, it goes without saying that whatsoever thing applies to the whole applies equally to its several parts. It is individual hearts – not merely bodies – that comprise the church; therefore, every Christian's heart must, too, be a Garden Enclosed.

There are many gems of mystery and delight concealed in the seeming simplicity of meaning presented in today's Gospel text from John 20:19-23 & 24. Four salient points stand out starkly in the very first verse (19):

1. The TIME of the setting for the narrative;
2. The SHUT DOOR;
3. The GROUP assembled;
4. The PRESENCE revealed.

### **The Time**

19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week The occasion was the first day of the week (our Sunday) on the day that the most good that had ever been done for the sake of lost man had occurred. Christ had risen from the Grave on this early morning even before the rising of the sun. But the occasion that brought these men together was not to celebrate that glorious event of the day, but out of fear of the Jews. That stormy night when their vessel was being swamped by the wind-swept billows of the Galilean Sea, when Jesus came walking on the tumultuous deep to their aid, was not forefront to their minds on this evening. They feared then as now. They feared the most when they had the least to fear. If we can, at least, always remember that Christ is forever with us in that Valley of the Shadow of Death, we will not despair of faith and hope. The disciples gathered in the shut-up room had forgotten that Jesus had told them that He would arise on the third day; else, they did not believe Him. Even before He appeared to them in visual form, He had been there among them. He is surely with you, friend, as well as you study and meditate upon today's Gospel text – or, do you doubt His Word even as did His closest disciples? "...lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. (Matt 28:20) To the Jewish chronicler, the week is identical in number with the musical scale of seven notes, and the next is the eighth and beginning note of the succeeding one. So the first day of the week was often mentioned as the eighth day. Eight signifies, numerologically, "new beginnings." It is the day upon which the children of Israel were circumcised, and the number of souls that were saved for a new beginning on the Ark of Noah. So the first Easter Sunday represents our new beginning in Christ.

### **The Shut Door**

"...when the doors were shut" Why were the doors shut? To protect from the world of danger that lurked beyond those doors. The doors were not shut to imprison those within, but to protect from the danger without. If the doors were shut, how was it possible for Christ to enter in bodily form? For one thing, the Body of Christ was a glorified Body following His resurrection. It was not subject to the physical limitations of our flesh-bound bodies. But for another, no DOOR can preclude the entry of Christ to His people. Christ Himself is the only DOOR that matters to us. A DOOR serves two purposes: to admit entry, or to deny entry. Christ is the DOOR to salvation and to the Kingdom of God. He was the DOOR, symbolically of Noah's Ark. That DOOR made secure those who were in the will and presence of God, and it denied entry to those of the world who had too long denied Him. He is the DOOR of His Church – "...no man cometh unto the Father but by ME." The Church is a Garden Enclosed. A Garden requires cultivation and safeguarding. The rodents (demons) and weeds (sin) must be barred entry. Unfortunately, the Church of today is in disarray for the door has been left open. All manner of evils and many demons have come to roost in her branches. Such churches do not belong to Christ, but to the demons to whom they admit entry.

### **The Group Assembled**

"...where the disciples were assembled" This, dear friends, seems to represent (to me) the embryonic Church on the first full day of its purchase! God will use whatever device is required to sustain His Church and bring together its members. In this case, it

was fear, but that fear led to a wonderful revelation which would never, in future, be forgotten by these disciples and apostles. Incidentally, you will remember that “fear is the beginning of knowledge.” A good teacher will often know that a single dissertation of the lesson may not suffice – repetition aids recall. So, even though Christ has clearly told these men what to expect after His death on the cross, they have forgotten the lesson. He now appears to the gathered Church to reinforce that lesson. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them. (Matt 18:20) Regardless your concept of the Communion Service, you must freely admit that Christ is spiritually present at every Table of the Lord. The group gathered behind the shut doors was the first Church service of the New Testament Church. They were enclosed with Christ who is truly ALWAYS the DOOR of our salvation.

### **The Presence Revealed**

If you believe the words of Christ, you will always remember that where two or three are gathered together in His name, there He is among them. The environment matters not a whit – it is the gathered hearts that constitute a Church gathering. Prison bars are no worth in shutting Christ out. Neither are cathedral gates. He enters always wherever His people are assembled. We always have that Presence of Christ with us when we consume the Bread of Heaven and drink the Water of Life from the pages of His Word. I feel that Presence as I write and am reminded that I must never be flippant in my labors for Him. He warmly touches the wings of my heart and whispers thoughts of beauty and love to my thirsty soul. He is with the little child crossing the bridged stream, and He is with the weary old saint trudging the Narrow Way that leads up to the Straight Gate. If we do not learn ANYTHING else from today’s lesson, let us know that Christ never forsakes His own. I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. (Heb 13:5) It is a thrill for me to know that the great cloud of witnesses in Christ also include my beloved kin and friends who have preceded me in death and who died in Christ. Is it not a comfort of immeasurable proportion, friend? What is the greatest reward of having Christ in constant attendance with His people? It is a peace that surpasses all understanding, for He forever speaks to His people: Peace be unto you.

Now these great gems that appear early in the text are simple doors for further revelation of His wonderful grace towards us. Christ never comes to create doubt, but to our hearts to understanding. He proves His Presence to our love-famished hearts. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. Can we blame the disciples for their doubts engendered by the terrors and horrors of the previous days? Would we have carried on with greater trust and faith? I doubt it! Nothing so wonderful had ever happened in the history of the world, so we may dismiss our hard judgments and grant a fullness of grace and understanding to these men whose lives later demonstrated a willingness to die for our Lord and, in fact, DID do so. Not many ‘reverend fathers’ would have half the faith and courage of these disciples – both men and women. A greater understanding always results in a larger measure of peace. After seeing the risen Lord, whom they had witnessed crucified and dead, they were “glad.” But one reassurance is always supported by others. Faith in Christ is like the budding of a red rose of early June. The rosebud is tightly closed in on itself until Nature’s God dictates the time of its opening. It then reveals an inner beauty, pedal by pedal, that is beyond the skill of man to duplicate.

A further commission given to the disciples, and to us, is revealed in the next line of Christ’s counsel: 21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. God the Father sent His only Begotten Son to redeem us

from our sins by dying on the cross. Have you died to self lately? Doesn't taking up our cross daily mean, also, dying daily to self? Thankfully, God does not require our physical bodies to be hung on a rude cross, or to be burned at the stake. He asks far less – that we surrender our selfish motives and greedy inclinations daily in favor of a loving concern for the little child who has no father, or lacks bodily nourishment. It means casting our prideful rags from our shoulders and admitting, on every occasion possible, that we are followers of Christ and believers of His Word. Do we allow biblical truth to be trampled upon in the public square? Are we silent on issues of biblical morality such as homosexuality or abortion simple because we want to 'fit in' with the values of the world? Careful, Christian professor, lest you fit in too well with the world and become like unto it!

Christ has given us the Holy Ghost. As Christians, we cannot reject this great Resource for the benefit of our souls and testimony. It is given to the Church as a Lamp unto our Feet and a Light unto our Path. Rather than parsing every jot and tittle of the law (that is, worshipping in truth only), we must now combine the clear words of Truth with the ameliorating grace of the Holy Spirit. But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him. (John 4:23) Even if the Pharisees relied upon scriptural truth, they lacked the love to forego hard judgment and administer that truth in the love of God. Truth without the attending Spirit can even appear as a great lie! 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost The Holy Ghost can be at every place and at all times. Peter had such great and manly courage that he severed the ear of the guard who came for Christ in the Garden that fateful night; yet, just minutes later, poor Peter (separated physically from Christ) denied His Lord three times. Being vested with the Holy Ghost, the Church now has its marching orders, and the means whereby those orders may be executed through the power of the Spirit. His final line is a commission, not to the individual believer, but to the Christ-like Church: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

The lectionary did not include verse 24 in the prescribed text today, but I did add it. Now you will find out why. 24 *But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came.* Do you see what glorious joys are missed when we fail to attend the worship of the Church? Thomas was a doubter because Thomas was not, at this time, diligent to know the truth. He was absent from Church this Sunday of the resurrection and would, therefore, have to learn at a later time the marvelous mystery Christ would have taught him this day had he attended service. And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (Heb 10:24-25)

The Word of God is so refreshing and fulfilling that I wish time and interest would permit me to go on and on; but even an acorn of truth is better than an heart devoid of an acorn of it. God bless.