COMING AND GOING

But Thomas (who was called the Twin) was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.”

Christian parents and congregations and godparents want to pass their faith along to their children.

Faith in Christ, the discipline of worship, and the fellowship of other Christians have long been important to this man. Like a lot of people he probably cannot say why this is so. (It’s like asking someone to analyze why he fell in love with his wife. Who knows? It just happened.) He knows that his faith and the practice of it are a source of health in his life. He wants his children to live connected to that same Source (capital S) of life.

A woman still has fond memories of growing up in a Lutheran church. Sunday school and confirmation classes and youth activities were fun, and filled with good people. She learned to ski because of the church youth group. As she looks back she recognizes that the values that surrounded her in church, along with her church friends, were a positive influence. They protected her from some dangerous choices, and encouraged her toward healthy ones, helping her to have a healthy adolescence and a happy life. She wants the same blessed experience for her children.

He was often sick as a child, once seriously ill, but the nurture of loving family and church, and the message about Jesus’ suffering and love helped him to endure that time and emerge from it not feeling sorry for himself, but more aware of the hurts and troubles of others. Christ and Christian church ministry activities have nurtured and expanded that youthful gift of compassion. He wants his children to believe, to live close to Christ and become people not wrapped up in self, but alert friends and generous citizens.

A woman is trying to make it on a single, moderate income. She and her daughter must spend carefully. She has known wealth in the past. Her relationship with Christ and the Body of Christ has helped her to sort out her life and come to an understanding of what truly matters. She is at peace (usually) with her economic situation, and grateful for her blessings. She wants her daughter to live close to Christ and have the same peace, the same wisdom.

Just as the ten disciples wanted Thomas to experience the joy and hope and new understanding that had filled them when they saw the risen Lord, so Christian parents and godparents and grandparents and churches want to pass faith along to the children God has given us.

And that’s what today is about! Today’s wonderful gospel reading deals primarily with the
question, “How is faith transmitted, created?” In addition, as we worship today we look ahead to the (11:00 am service) (time later in this service) when three children will be baptized: Jordan Ainsworth, James Ainsworth, and Alison Martin.

Holy Baptism, especially of infants and children, is about passing faith along to another generation by the power of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the baptized person. Kids Community classes, confirmation classes, youth retreats and mission trips, worship and Holy Communion: all these aim to provide vessels through which the Holy Spirit can do her work; all these grow out of a desire to help children grow into faith and to nurture faith so that our children can become lively believers and members of the Body of Christ.

When you think about it, much of what we Lutheran Christians do is geared toward passing faith along not to strangers (that would be an aspect of our work that is less strong), but to our children.

*But [Thomas] said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”*

Just as a 400 meter relay team discovers it is not easy to pass the baton along from runner to runner, but requires diligent effort and practice, so Christians, like the ten disciples, have discovered it is not an easy thing to pass faith along.

The man I mentioned previously may find Christian faith a healthy part of his life, but his son, a bright boy, is confused and wonders, “If God is so good, why do so many people suffer so badly?” He struggles with trusting God.

The mother may have enjoyed youth classes and activities, but her daughter thinks church is boring, and her closest friends are outside the church.

The father was often sick as a child, but his children are healthy as can be. They will need to meet Christ and know Christ is a different way.

The mother may be at peace with her limited finances, but her daughter feels embarrassed about her wardrobe, doesn’t feel she “fits in” with the mostly well-to-do kids in church, and finds her life more filled with struggle than peace.

It isn’t easy to pass faith along to our children. They live in a different world and have different experiences than those that shaped their parents and grandparents.

It isn’t easy to pass faith along to our children. We encourage them to question, to think for themselves. We want them to be strong in the face of peer pressure. We don’t want them to grab hold of some goofy religion, follow some deluded, self-appointed messiah like Jim Jones or David Koresh. (If you aren’t familiar with those names, Google them!)
To my knowledge I have caused my mother to cry three times. The first was early summer when I was 7 years old; I fell and broke my arm, and she cried because this was the third consecutive summer I would have to spend some weeks with limited activity (broken arm – eye surgery – broken arm). The third time Mom cried was on the day Dianne and I were married.

But the second time was when I, about 18 years old, said, “It’s stupid to baptize babies! You should wait ‘til they are old enough to know what they are doing. Then it will mean more to them.” My Lutheran mother wept, feeling that I, an ungrateful wretch, was throwing into the garbage my Lutheran religious heritage and my mother’s heart! And I was! I, thinking for myself, having had some experiences my parents had not had, had become a Baptist for what seemed at the time good reasons. It was several more years before I began to understand the spiritual treasures in the Lutheran understanding of baptism; that involved for me a great struggle and other unique experiences. But I had to go through it. I had to work it out myself.

I apologize, Mom and Dad, for the occasional nastiness with which I went about my “individuation,” thinking for myself. But I think by now they are glad I was thinking for myself about Christ and church. I threw my Lutheran heritage into the garbage, but another day, years later, I picked it back out of the trash. Then it wasn’t just their faith; it was my faith.

*Jesus said to Thomas, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.”*

We do Thomas a disservice. We call him “doubting Thomas” and consider him weaker in faith than the others. But he wasn’t! He was asking for no more than the others had already received. Why were his ten comrades so full of faith and excitement? They had *seen the Lord.* Seen! They *saw* the risen Christ and *touched* him. Thomas just wanted to have the same experience so he could be as full of faith as they.

Martin Luther, explaining the Creed’s Third Article on the Holy Spirit, said, “I believe that I cannot be my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him…” “I believe that I cannot…believe!” Like Thomas. Like Pr, Carl and Pr. Rebecca. Like you.

But Luther didn’t stop there. “I believe that I cannot by my own understanding or effort believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with her gifts, and sanctified and kept me in true faith.”

The Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith. It is God’s work, not “my own understanding or effort.” God gives what we need to believe! So on the evening after his resurrection Jesus came to the fear-full disciples, said, “Peace be with you,” and then breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.” The risen Jesus gives his disciples the Holy Spirit that creates and sustains faith in them. So faith doesn’t depend on seeing and touching, but on God the Holy Spirit.
Then, looking beyond that room, down through the centuries and into this room, Jesus said to Thomas and the other ten, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have come to believe.”

But how does it happen that we who have not seen come to believe? How will the Holy Spirit use church and parents and sponsors to pass faith along to Alison and James and Jordan?

John says: Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

We believe because of what is written, because of someone else’s testimony.

We believe because of John’s words about Jesus, because of preachers’ words about Jesus, because of parents’ words about Jesus, because of teachers’ words about Jesus, because of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion, words and actions that point us to Jesus. We believe because many people, in words and actions, have borne witness to Jesus.

Is that enough? Is that enough to create faith in a hard-to-convince, think-for-yourself skeptic like Thomas…or you? Yes, it is enough! And like the empty tomb, faith is always a gift and always a surprise!

Today three children are baptized into Christ and the Body of Christ. We want to pass on faith to them. What should parents do? What should church and godparents do?

Luther says, “Pray as if everything depended on God and work as if everything depended on you.”

Last October Marilyn Sharpe gave us some ideas about how church can “work as if everything depended on” us as faith parents and faith grandparents to these children among us. In part because of Marilyn’s vision we are now offering “church sponsors” to each baptized child, to supplement the work of the wonderful godparents the parents have selected. Larry and Colleen Struve, who loved James and Jordan’s late grandmother, Lyn, have agreed to be their church baptismal sponsors. Judy and Mike Shimahara (unable to be here today) are similarly delighted to serve as church baptismal sponsors for Alison.

If you feel called to serve in this way, or if you would like more information about serving a child in this way, talk with Pr. Rebecca or me.

For Jesus not only invites us to come to believe, but also to go and serve: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

We celebrate today that, living close to Jesus, we are always coming and going: coming to believe, and going to pass faith along.