An ancient legend recounts how Satan tried to get into heaven by pretending to be the Risen Christ. Being a master of deception, Satan took with him a contingent of demons made up as angels of light and shouted up to the gates of heaven, “Lift up your heads, o ye gates, and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in.”

The heavenly angels looked down on what they believed was their king returning in triumph from the dead and shouted back with joy, “Who is the king of glory?”

Then Satan made a critical mistake. In every particular, save one, he looked just like Christ. When the angels asked, “Who is the king of glory?”, Satan opened his arms and said, “I am.” But in this act of arrogance the angels saw his outstretched palms that bore no wounding marks of the nails and refused to let the imposter enter.

The gospel lesson we just heard describes a pervasive atmosphere of fear. The disciples were gathered behind locked doors. Although they heard Mary Magdalene say that she had seen the Risen Lord and two of their number had found the tomb empty, they were lost in “fear and disbelief”. Overcome by the seeming finality of death, they were cut off from Jesus.

Whether they gathered behind those locked doors out of habit, or for support and protection, is not addressed by John. What is absolutely key in his account is that Jesus appeared to this lost and hopeless band of followers. He did not leave them as “orphans”, but came to them with a greeting of peace.

Commentators tells us the fact that he spoke a word of peace two times is significant. This was not simply a word of greeting, but a promise that he would never be separated from them again. No longer do fear and death rule. Christ’s peace is now assured. To prove his victory over death, Jesus showed them his scars. This was their Master, the one who had hung on the cross. He had the scars to prove it—the scars of death—yet he was alive. Can you imagine the excitement and joy those disciples must have felt when they saw that life is victorious over death? The room must have been on fire, but there is more to the story.

Jesus didn’t rise from the dead just to demonstrate his personal power over the grave. He rose victorious so that the world might experience the victory of life, too. He gave his disciples the mission to make believers out of all who lived in despair and disbelief, who doubted that God cared for them or could deliver them from evil. And to empower them for mission, Jesus gave them his Spirit. He breathed on them so that the same breath, the same life, the same Spirit that directed, sustained, and inspired him would now flow in and through them.
Commissioned by Jesus, the disciples begin their mission with Thomas who had been absent when Jesus appeared to them. They told him, “We have seen the Lord”, but Thomas would not believe them unless he saw the wounds on his master’s body. Robert Smith writes, “Thomas does not want just any visible and tangible proof. He does not ask to hear Jesus’ voice or see his face or grasp his wrists or ankles or watch him as he eats. He fixes his request, and the readers’ attention, on the crucifixion. He wants to see wounds on a resurrected body. He wants convincing that the glorified one is identical with the crucified.”

We all know how the story ends. Just as with the disciples, Jesus did not leave Thomas trapped in fear or disbelief. Mysteriously, a week later, he appeared again where they were still in hiding behind locked doors. Approaching Thomas, Jesus invited him to touch his wounded body, saying, “Do not be faithless, but believing.” The point is clear. Death has lost its sting to those who follow the Risen Lord. The wounds of the living Christ serve to show the depth of his love for us, his obedience to the Father, and the defeat of Satan. Christ’s wounds are no longer grim scars of defeat, but badges of victory.

It falls to Thomas, then, to utter the confession of faith that is the culmination of John’s gospel, “My Lord and my God!” This Jesus, his friend and Master for whom he was once willing to die, is the Messiah who has overcome death itself.

Not only was Thomas’ confession a resounding affirmation of the opening of John’s gospel in which we hear that “the Word was made flesh”, it was also an act of political courage. At the end of the first century when John’s gospel was written, the Roman emperors, Nero and Domitian, gave themselves the title, “dominus et deus”, “Lord and God”. These rulers dealt severely with anyone who refused to give them divine honor. Undoubtedly, it was seen by many as supreme foolishness not to just go along with the emperor’s claims. However, the community for whom John wrote took heart from Thomas’ faithful confession. It is not he who has the power to kill to whom one must give ultimate obedience and worship, but to him who has the power to bring life out of death.

We live in a world that still rejects the way of the cross and is more in need of redemption than ever before. Alienation, terrorism, hunger, economic and political warfare, greed, and self-sufficiency all conspire to make a mockery of God’s creation today. It is still so tempting for us to give into pity, resentment and defeat as the followers of Jesus did when they gathered behind locked doors. But Jesus still comes to us today, just as he came then.

Mysteriously, he makes himself present here in bread and wine, through prayer and preaching. He comes to us to equip us for service to the world. His Easter victory is not a long ago event meant to assure us only of an eternal rest when we die. Easter’s victory is found right now wherever God’s people bear witness that love is more powerful than evil and death. As Easter people, we are called to embody the love of Christ in classrooms and board rooms, in soup kitchens and legislative chambers; advocating for the least among us and companioning those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit.
Christ’s resurrection invites you and me to live a new and fuller life, but one that will involve sacrifice as we follow the Risen Lord. But we can do so for Christ’s Spirit goes with us, giving us courage and creativity in speaking truth to power and promising us life in abundance as we live by love and its demands. We can risk being wounded and sharing our wounds with one another because the Lord Jesus still comes to us in our doubts and fears. He comes, knowing our every need, with open arms of healing, forgiveness, and the peace that comes from living in his presence.

I began this sermon with the story of Satan trying to sneak into heaven. I end with a question inspired by Thomas; a question which the world might address to the church: “If you say you are Christians, I ask you, ‘Please, may I see your hands? May I see your feet? May I see your side?’ If you have scars because of your hunger and thirst for justice, love, forgiveness, and everything Jesus lived and died for, I will believe.”

Will we confess Jesus as Lord and God in our lives, in our life together in the community called St. Paul’s? This week members of our parish will begin two very significant challenges. At Jeanne’s invitation, on Wednesday night about twenty leaders of our parish will begin a six week study and dialogue on Leadership and Race. Also this week, we have an opportunity through Greater Cleveland Congregations to begin collecting 6,000 signatures from Cleveland voters to put a referendum on the ballot to stop the Quicken Loans Arena deal until a better one, with a funding stream for critical life-saving measures for the least among us in our neighborhoods, can be crafted. Neither of those challenges will be easy.

Will we as St. Paul’s Church respond to Christ’s Easter victory by giving our time and talents, despite our fears and doubts, trusting Christ to sustain us and raise us up when we fall? Will we take on the problems of our world, walking the way of the cross as Jesus did, trusting him to show us that the way of sacrificial love is more powerful than anything else? The world is dying to know.