

Psalm 150
John 20:19-31

Second Sunday of Easter, Year C
Midway Presbyterian Church
April 28, 2019

One Final Blessing

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm for this Second Sunday of Easter is a song of praise to God who does “mighty deeds” and whose greatness surpasses all others. And what could be greater than the resurrection? The psalmist’s call to praise becomes a summons for us to live in the light of this almighty God. Listen to these words from Psalm 150...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson for today we read of two appearances of Jesus: first to apparently 10 of the disciples (without Judas or Thomas), and secondly to the disciples with Thomas present. Thomas sees and believes. And then Jesus pronounces a blessing for all those who have not seen, yet come to believe. Listen to these words from John 20:19-31...

Sermon

The Sunday after Easter Sunday is sometimes called Low Sunday, perhaps because of the contrast with the high festival of Easter on the preceding Sunday. Today we note that the lilies are gone from the sanctuary. The “church alumni” have come and gone and will not be back until Christmas. And for some it seems that Christ is back in the tomb.

So perhaps this is an appropriate time to remind ourselves that this is the Second Sunday *of* Easter, not the First Sunday *after* Easter. In the church year Easter is not just a day, but a season, concluding at Pentecost. The white paraments and stole reflect this understanding. In fact, every Sunday we celebrate the resurrection, because the early Christians moved their day of

worship from the Sabbath—Saturday—to Sunday, the day of Christ’s resurrection. Our interest now is to sustain the significance of Easter Sunday for us.

The Gospel Lesson today constitutes the second half of the resurrection narrative in John. In the section just prior to today’s text we find the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, and then on the evening of that day to the disciples. Even though the doors were locked, suddenly he was standing there among them. John says that Jesus showed them his hands and his side, which is to say that the risen Christ is the same Jesus they had known and who was crucified, dead, and buried. He is the same Jesus who healed the sick and forgave the sinner, who taught the things that pertain to life and holiness, and who called people to follow him.

Jesus stands among the disciples and blesses them, and the disciples rejoice. Next he commissions them, sending them forth, even as the Father had sent him. And in what is known as the Johannine Pentecost, Jesus asks them to receive the Holy Spirit.

But then we learn that one of the first persons to whom they tell the good news that Jesus is risen—that person does not believe. He insists on tangible evidence. Thus, we have the story of the appearance of Jesus to one whom we have come to know as “Doubting Thomas.”

Thomas has already been introduced in the Gospel of John. We meet him in chapter 11, verse 16, as a man of courage. Here, the disciples were fearful that Jesus would be stoned by the Jews if he went to Judea again. Jesus says he is going there to care for Lazarus who is ill. The verse reads:

Thomas, called the Twin, said to his fellow disciples,
“Let us also go, that we may die with him.”

Then we meet Thomas again in chapter 14, verse 5, asking an honest question:

Lord, we do not know where you are going;
how can we know the way?

And Jesus' familiar answer:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.” (Jn. 14:6)

Now in verses 24-29 of chapter 20 we meet Thomas a third time. The night of the day that Jesus had first appeared to Mary Magdalene and then the assembled disciples, Thomas had not been present. We do not know why. It has been suggested that what Thomas had expected, happened. Jesus was crucified; he was dead and buried. Thomas was broken-hearted and he wanted to bear his grief alone. And when the other disciples told him what had happened—that Jesus was back alive—Thomas was not convinced.

As to the first reports, it had been dark, or nearly so; Mary was strained and overwrought by all she had been through; her eyes were full of tears and she did not see clearly; she had imagined what was not there. And as for this alleged appearance to the disciples, the thing could be nothing more than sheer hallucination, born of frayed nerves or of longing for what could never be. It was wishful thinking that had only seemed to come true—like seeing water in the desert, a mirage.

You know, doubt is not all bad. C. Carswell Hughs says that doubt can keep us from making costly mistakes. Sometimes people latch on to a belief prematurely, and it proves to be costly, like those followers of Jim Jones when on November 18, 1978, 912 people became victims of the Jonestown Massacre, drinking a powdered mix laced with cyanide. Even today, when someone is gullible, it may be said that they “drank the Kool-Aid.” Hughs says that Thomas doubted, not because he did not want to believe; rather, he doubted because he wanted what he believed to be true.

In 1843 Anne Brontë wrote a twelve-stanza poem called, “The Doubter’s Prayer.” It is moving in its plea for faith in a time of doubt, its recognition that faith comes as a gift of mercy, and that relief can only come from the God who is, at the moment, hidden behind a cloud of doubt. In what is perhaps the theological heart of the poem we read:

O help me God! For thou alone
 Canst my distracted soul relieve;
 Forsake it not, it is Thine own,
 Though weak; yet longing to believe.

Scripture reveals that there are different paths to Easter faith. Fred Craddock says, “For some, faith is as gentle as a child on a grandmother’s lap, but for others, it is a continual wrestling with doubt.” John, the beloved disciple, believed with no evidence but the empty tomb. Mary Magdalene believed when Jesus spoke her name. And the ten disciples believed because they saw the Lord. For Thomas Easter faith came with difficulty. But, thanks to Jesus, it came.

When Jesus came back the first time, Thomas was not there. The message that the Lord had risen seemed to him too good to be true. Another week passed and Jesus came back again. And this time Thomas was there. And Jesus invited him to have the evidence he wanted:

“Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand,
 and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing.”

There is no indication that Thomas actually touched Jesus. But there definitely is his confession of faith, as his heart ran out in love and devotion, and all he could say was:

“My Lord and my God.”

Thomas was convinced. The Christ he had known and followed was not dead, but alive. In fact, he was present right there with him and the other disciples. The same one who had tasted the salt of our sorrow on his lips was risen from the grave.

John Killinger tells of an elderly woman whose life with her husband had not been enriched from a material standpoint. However, for their tenth wedding anniversary her husband bought her an old console radio. And that radio quickly became her most prized possession. Many times in the night the husband awakened to find his wife absent. His search for her always led him to the parlor where he found her with her ear pressed against the radio's speaker, listening to faint sounds that came from the instrument on its lowest volume setting. And each time he asked, "What are you doing?" she replied, "I just wanted to be sure it was still here."

The disciples returned to the Upper Room because something special had happened there. In a similar way we return week after week to worship at Midway, because special things have happened here. We don't always experience it that way. Sometimes our filters are too clogged or we are not prayerfully prepared. Sometimes the preacher seems unprepared or not "present in the moment." He reads the scripture as if he were reading the newspaper. The sermon is not Biblical or it is preached as if nothing is at stake. But most of the time God's word is proclaimed and heard, even as a whisper from the lowest volume setting. And something special happens, and when it does, we are glad we have come.

In the Sermon on the Mount we find "The Beatitudes" in Matthew 5:1-11:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
 for theirs is the kingdom of heaven
 Blessed are those who mourn,
 for they shall be comforted.
 Blessed are the meek,
 for they shall inherit the earth...

The Beatitudes are blessings that Jesus pronounces on certain people.

Here in John 20:28 we have one final blessing—the Last Beatitude:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

Later generations like ours have no empty tomb, no voice speaking our name, and no presence of Jesus with visible wounds. Some may think, “Oh, I wish I could have been there.” But the fact that we have not seen a resurrection appearance need not be an obstacle, but an invitation to blessing. We are blessed in that, by the grace of God, we have learned to believe what we have not yet been allowed to see. In the words of Paul in his Second Letter to the Church in Corinth:

For we live by faith, and not by sight. (5:7)

In the concluding two verses of our Gospel Lesson John writes:

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

The purpose of John’s writing is to generate faith in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God which gives life. And so, if today, or tomorrow, or next month, or next year, you are plagued by doubt, listen to the text, and receive Christ’s blessing:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.