

## Two Blessings

### *Introduction to the Psalm*

In our Psalm for this Second Sunday of Easter, we hear of the Lord's blessing being known by a people who live in unity. Listen to these words from Psalm 133...

### *Introduction to the Gospel Lesson*

In our Gospel Lesson today, following his crucifixion, Jesus comes unexpectedly into the company of bewildered and fearful disciples. Thomas is not present, hears of the appearance, but does not believe. Later Jesus appears again, and Thomas is present. And because he sees, he believes. Then Jesus pronounces a blessing on all who do not see, and yet believe. Listen to these words from John 20, verses 19-31...

### *Sermon*

Today 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 50-day season, concluding at Pentecost. 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 meaning of Easter Sunday in our individual lives and in the life of the church. One way to help achieve that goal is to focus on the two blessings that we find in our lectionary readings for today.

In our Psalm of just three verses, we find God's blessing being bestowed upon people who live in unity. This is true be it a marriage, a family, a country, or a church.

Living in unity does not mean that we agree on everything, for there will be many opinions, just as there are many notes in a musical chorus. But it does mean that we will work together for a common purpose. Our Mission Statement on the back of our Sunday bulletin says:

Our purpose is to call people into a living and growing relationship with God in Jesus Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to promote the mission of Christ in compassionate ministries.

We intend to be a welcoming and caring church – a church family that nurtures a sense of community and belonging. We want young and old to join us in the Christian pilgrimage as sojourners in the great adventure of faith.

As with most pastors who have been in the ministry for many years, I have experienced both unity and disunity. I'm happy to say that at Midway the experience is one of unity. Our outward expression of unity reflects our inward unity of purpose.

Unity is important because it makes the church a positive example in a world full of strife and controversy. Furthermore, it gives us a foretaste of what we will experience in

heaven. And our unity renews and revitalizes ministry and mission because there is less turmoil to sap away our energy.

How very good and pleasant it is  
when kindred live together in unity! (133:1)

...

For there the Lord ordained his blessing,  
life evermore. (133:3b)

Now our Gospel lesson this morning constitutes the second half of the resurrection narrative in the fourth gospel. In the section just prior to today's lesson we find the appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene, and then on the evening of that day—the first day of the week, now Sunday—Jesus appears to the disciples and offers them his peace. 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 who was with the twelve and who was crucified, dead, and buried. He is the same Jesus who healed the sick and forgave the sinner, who taught about the things that pertain to life and holiness, who gave the beatitudes, and who called people to follow him.

Jesus stands among the disciples and blesses them with his peace. 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 invites them to receive the Holy Spirit.

But then we learn in the second section of the lesson that one of the first persons to whom they tell the good news that Jesus is risen—this 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 Lazareth 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 but by me. (Jn. 14:6a)

Now in verses 26-29 of our lesson 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. William Barclay says 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 could not have been there, for Christ was dead, and dead men do not rise. 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 seemed to come true—like seeing the mirage of water in a desert.

You know, doubt is not all bad. It 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, the charismatic cult leader, when on November 18, 1978 more than 900 people died in a mass suicide/murder in the South American nation of Guyana. C. Carson Hughes says that Thomas doubted not because he did not want to believe; rather, he doubted because he wanted what he believed *to be true*.

Anne Brontë grew up in the parsonage of Haworth in Yorkshire, England—one of six children. Her mother died when she was one. Anne and her sisters, Charlotte and Emily, became great writers. Anne, author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; Charlotte, *Jane Eyre*, and Emily, *Wuthering Heights*. When I think of *Wuthering Heights*, I recall the black tomcat Hazel and I loved some 50 years ago in Pontotoc, Mississippi. We named him Heathcliff after the main male character in that novel. Anne's poem, "The Doubter's Prayer," was written in 1843 when she was 23 years old, and was originally titled "A Hymn." 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 twelve-stanza poem she writes:

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.

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. He could not believe without proof.

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 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 followed was not dead, but alive. The One who had tasted the salt of our sorrow on his lips was risen from the grave.

Finally, in the Sermon on the Mount we find Jesus’ “Beatitudes”:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted...(Mt. 5:1-12)

Here in John 20:28 we have Jesus’ final blessing—his Last Beatitude:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

You know, it’s one thing to believe when all is well and our prayers are answered as we desire. It’s another when our prayers don’t seem to make it beyond the four walls of our rooms. When we’ve lost our job or when our retirement account has dropped precipitously. Or when the doctor says, “I’m sorry, but the test results are not good.”

To be sure, there are different roads 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 continual wrestling with doubt.” John, the beloved disciple, believed with no evidence but the empty tomb. Mary Magdelene believed because Jesus spoke her name. And the ten disciples believed because they saw the Lord. For Thomas, the courageous disciple, Easter faith came with difficulty. But, thanks to Jesus, it came.

Charles Cousar, retired professor at Columbia Seminary, says that later generations, of course, have no empty tomb, no voice speaking, and no presence of Jesus with visible wounds. Some may think, “O I wish that I could have been there.” They need to hear this last beatitude:

Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.

Our inability to see resurrection appearances need not be a hindrance but an invitation to blessing. We are blessed in that we have learned to believe what we have not yet been allowed to see.

As John states in the concluding two verses of our Gospel lesson, that’s the purpose of his gospel—that we may believe, and that believing, we may have life in his name.

Two blessings from scripture. One upon those who live together in unity. And one upon those who have not seen, yet believe. May these blessings be ours during this season of Easter, and even throughout the year.

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