

2nd Sunday of Easter

St Martha's, Bethany Beach

April 11, 2021

Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

1 John 1:1-2:2

John 20:19-31

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

Our Lectionary provides us with three readings this morning which, when taken together, offer a glimpse of the early life of the church. There are two themes which run through the readings - one is of community. The early church was a close-knit community which shared what possessions they had in common. The second theme was of faith in God. This faith wasn't the way we think of faith today, as something you have to do without proof - on the contrary, the faith of the early church was based on the plain evidence of Jesus' resurrection, summed up by the phrase: "seeing is believing."

In the first letter of John, the author writes that "we declare to you...what we have seen with our eyes." What they have seen is the resurrection of Christ, which is also confirmed in a letter of Paul, who notes that the resurrected Jesus appeared to over 500 people (1 Corinthians 15:6). How else can we explain the radical and dramatic change which took place in the lives of the followers of Jesus, as they went out into the world to proclaim of gospel, with the fire of evangelism burning within their hearts. The resurrection is the validation of Jesus' ministry and mission. It contextualizes it, if you like. Everything Jesus said or did can now be understood through the prism of resurrection.

However, not all of Jesus' followers saw the resurrected Jesus. One in particular - Thomas - is the subject of today's gospel reading. He gets unfairly singled out as "doubting Thomas", although I am sure the others doubted as much as he did, until they had seen Jesus for themselves. For some reason, Thomas wasn't with the others when Jesus appeared the first time. We can ask, why not? Where was he?

One theory which I like, is that while the others were cowering in fear behind closed doors, Thomas was out evangelizing and sharing the lessons he had learned from his master. He was certainly brave enough to do so: we have the evidence of when Jesus was about to travel to Bethany, thereby placing himself in danger. Thomas said then: "Let us go also, that we may die with him." This is evidence not only of Thomas's bravery, but also of his love for Jesus. It's not unreasonable to think that, even after the crucifixion, Thomas wants the memory of his Lord and teacher to be preserved, rather than to be forgotten.

Thomas is with the disciples when Jesus visits them a second time. They are behind locked doors, for fear of being discovered. It's hardly an auspicious start for what will become the largest worldwide movement in human history. Their fear is what is holding back this movement. To this close-knit but frightened group, Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you." It's such a simple but reassuring greeting. It's also a gift to them, that God's peace is bestowed on them. The peace of God is given as an answer to the fear. This peace is not absence of conflict, because they will know plenty of that soon enough. This peace is what will give them the confidence and courage to do the work

for which Jesus has commissioned them - to preach the gospel, feed the poor, care for those in need.

In this second appearance, Jesus singles out Thomas for attention. He says to him, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." To which Thomas replies, emphatically, "My Lord and my God."

"My Lord and my God." From Thomas's point of view, that statement underlines the depth of his understanding and, we must assert, his faith. From the time Jesus called him, along the many journeys he shared with Jesus, from the simple meals he shared with Jesus and the others, and now, seeing him again, Thomas says what he knows, that Jesus is Lord and God.

If Thomas doubted, then he wasn't the first, and he wouldn't be the last. It's a question each one of us must answer - who was Jesus? I could ask that question of everyone in church, one by one, and you would be surprised at the variety of answers. Some will say, like Thomas, that Jesus is "my Lord and my God". Others will say that Jesus is a wonderful teacher and prophet but that he was not the Son of God, but only a gifted human being. One or two may even say he didn't die on the cross, but was taken down before he died.

The church is large enough to hold a variety of beliefs and positions. However, I think that our aim as Christians must be to share the faith of Thomas, because to deny the divinity of Jesus, or to deny the resurrection, only dilutes and weakens our faith. This isn't something you can force, however. It's good to be skeptical - at one time, I was very skeptical myself. I wanted to understand, but at the same time I wanted to keep the divine, resurrected Jesus at arm's length. Looking back, I can see how patient God was with me, and eventually he was able to turn my skepticism into certainty. I don't claim the credit, because God had his work cut out with me.

The faith of Thomas and his fellow disciples depended on their vision of the risen Christ to galvanize them into action. Seeing Jesus helped them to let go of their fear and begin the work of the kingdom, to which Jesus had drawn them. This was a project to which they could dedicate themselves, body, heart and soul. The faith of the disciples was their life: it was the air they breathed, even the food they ate.

I suppose we can say, "well, that's easy for them, because they saw the risen Christ. How about those of us who haven't?" Jesus gives you this answer: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". The fact that you are here today, regardless of what you believe, is an indication that your life has been touched in some way by the love of God for you. The good news is that, for those of you who believe without seeing, you are blessed.

Wherever you are on your journey of faith, think of yourself as being blessed. You are blessed and you can be a blessing to others. Have confidence in God, and with gratitude receive the gift of faith.

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

Father David Beresford