

Second Sunday of Easter April 7 2024

Acts 4:32-35; 1 John 1:1--2:2; John 20:19-31

Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This is the good news. The best news. That in Christ's resurrection death has been defeated.

The story of the next few weeks is the church's encounter with the risen Christ. The one in the Gospel of John occurs later on Easter Sunday. The disciples have heard the witness of Mary Magdalene of her encounter with the risen Christ that first Easter morning. Now here the disciples are, assembled behind locked doors and then Jesus is in their midst. In the assembly- "Peace be with you". He shows them his hands and side and then they rejoice at seeing him.

But Thomas is not with them- the language could be he was just absent from the room or that he had given up on the whole venture when Jesus died. But the disciples come to him and bear witness to their encounter with the risen Jesus. That they have "seen" him. The language used implies that this is a repeated encounter. That they are persistent with him. Thomas finally says, "I want to "see" him for myself." In essence, I don't trust your witness.

But- he is intrigued enough to be present with them a week later- on the first day of the week. Sunday. Jesus shows up again in the midst of this assembly of those who believe Jesus has been raised, and this one who is not sure. Before Thomas can say anything, Jesus says to him, "Do what you have to do. Do not be unbelieving but believing." Do not be untrusting but trusting.

Thomas responds with a confession none of the other disciples have made, “My Lord and my God!”

Then we have this coda- blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe/trust. This last line of Jesus is one I think is to bolster the trust of the community John wrote this gospel to. A group gathered between 50-60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Perhaps there were a few who had seen the risen Jesus firsthand, but most had not.

And we certainly fall into this latter group. A group that is blessed because we have not seen and yet have believed/trusted. One commentator asks the question, “If the blessed faith is not based on seeing, then what is it based on?”

He argues that for John, faith is based on the word. The Word that is Jesus “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. (John 1:1). This incarnate Word is Jesus whose presence is salvation for those who believe he is making God known to the world. As Mark would say, that in Jesus the reign of God has come near- close enough to feel the breath of it on our cheeks. Just as God used to walk close to Adam and Eve in the Garden in the cool evening breeze.

That Word is also the entirety of the Gospel of John which ends this pericope saying, “...this has been 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.” (20:31)

Faith, trust, is based on the Word that is proclaimed about the Word who is Jesus.

We see this in our other readings today. In Acts 1- Jesus appears to the disciples over 40 days. When that Spirit does come in Acts 2, Peter bears witness. Tells the story of Jesus. Proclaims the Word. And those in the crowd, who did not believe, respond- trust- and are baptized- and three thousand join this movement. They devote themselves to the apostle's witness to Jesus, to fellowship together, to breaking of bread and prayers.

Acts 3- Peter heals and teaches in the Temple. Bearing witness to the power of Jesus- not the power of the church. Not themselves. It is all in Jesus' name.

Acts 4- Peter and John before the Council. They tell the story, bear witness. They proclaim the Word. And are released. Then you have this description of that community- they live together as one. They witness- tell the story of Jesus - who is the Word. And great grace comes upon them.

1 John 1 is also a proclamation of the Word. A witness to what has been received but also to the Word that has come in Jesus and how that Word has transformed their lives.

Faith is trust. It's not head knowledge, but trust. Trust in the one whose story we tell. But also, trust in the community that tells that story to us. In this way, faith/trust is about relationship.

Looking at Fowler's stages of faith we know that it is normal for those in late adolescence to move from an experienced and affiliative faith (doing what the community you are in does) to a searching faith that asks "Okay, is this what I believe?"

I lived that myself. I was raised by my parents in the Lutheran Church. We attended church every Sunday, my sister and I were active in the various education and music ministries of the church, Mom and Dad both were active in serving as Sunday School teachers, on council, ushering, Women's Group leadership, etc. They lived out their faith at home as I observed our prayer life as a family and their own devotional and prayer life.

I also saw that Word proclaimed in my grandparents, especially my mother's mother, my Nana.

But then I hit my high school years and after a taste of church politics thought, I don't need this stuff. I have a pretty strong faith, I can do this alone. But I quickly found I couldn't. That I needed the community of faith that is the church.

My next move was the Searching Faith question. It's why I went to seminary when I graduated college. To answer the question, "What is a Christian who happens to be Lutheran and are I one?"

At the end of my time at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, I could own my faith. To say, this is who I am- a follower of Jesus who happens to be Lutheran. I could own it because I could say with certainty that this way of viewing Jesus and how the Word works in the world matches my own lived experience.

Part of that affirmation is because I could look to my parents and see their own devotion, and I trusted them and their witness. Because I knew that they had always worked for my own health and wellbeing. Because I could look to other

adults who I trusted, and peers, and see their own trust in this Word that is, and is about, Jesus. And I saw over time that trust was rewarded/never disappointed.

This faith/trust is not one that ever fully settles. We continue to explore and ask questions and push at this faith in our lives because this is how we grow. We break free of the old constrictions – at least in areas- and new growth sprouts.

If our purpose in life is to receive the love of God come to us in Jesus and to spread that love to others, then I think that means two main things for our lives.

First, it means we continually place ourselves in the position to encounter this Word. To hear God's Word and receive the Sacraments. Because we believe that it is in these things that we encounter Jesus- who is God's embodied love for us. So, we come to worship because we will receive both here. We read/listen to the Word that is scripture on a regular basis, because we encounter Jesus in that written Word. We fill our minds and our hearts and our eyes with this Good News. This transforming Word that brings life. That showers us with God's love.

Second, it means that we proclaim that Word to others in all we say and do. Just that. Bear witness. Scatter the seed of the Word and let the Spirit do the rest of the work.

The Christian faith is that simple. Just like it is for the first disciples. Jesus comes to us, in our locked rooms and gives us peace. He breathes the Holy Spirit upon us- first through the waters of baptism for most of us- but also through the Word proclaimed and lived around us. Then he sets us free to tell the story, of Jesus and of our own encounter with him. And this is not just an individual telling, but a communal one.

For we are not the body of Christ that is the church on our own. From the beginning, God in Christ calls us into community. And it is here, together, as a ya'll that we strive to figure out, "What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus, and are I one?" Where we strive together to figure out, "What does it mean to be faithful to Jesus in this day and age?" Where we work together to do the important work of bearing witness to what we have received. To share what mercy God has shown us.

We gather on this first day of the week, not behind locked doors, but perhaps a bit fearful as those other disciples were. The world has changed around us in many ways. We gather as a group of people who have seen the risen Jesus and those who might not be so sure. And Jesus comes into our midst with these words, "Peace be with you." Shalom be yours.

A peace that is more than just the absence of conflict but is a deep pool of calm, a wholeness that can only come to us when we are bathed in the Word that is Jesus. The love that comes from him.

And that Word and love is for all of us. Those who have seen and believed for years and those who aren't sure about this whole thing. Those who trust in the Word of their fellow believers and those who want to see for themselves.

And to all of us, Jesus says, come- see, hear, trust, believe. So that you may have life that truly is life.

This is the good news- that in Jesus- God has come near and that living in him we need fear nothing.

Thanks be to God.