

Easter 2, 2020; John 20:19-31 Yr A; Dale Ramerman

Welcome to Christ Episcopal Church on this second Sunday of Easter, 2020. We're gathered as a community of faith, via Zoom or Facebook, for the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday because we're in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Today's reading from the Gospel of John addresses questions that have been raised from the first reported encounters with the risen Lord: What does it take to convince us that Jesus rose from the dead, and what does "rose from the dead" mean?

Mary Magdalene, who had the first reported encounter with the risen Jesus, did not recognize him although she had known him for years. Thomas had missed the first post resurrection appearance of Jesus to the disciples and when told about Jesus's appearance wasn't convinced by their report. Thomas was a bit of a skeptic, like some of us, post-enlightenment folk: if we cannot see it, measure it, test it, replicate it, well, we have our doubts. Although Thomas lived seventeen centuries before the so called enlightenment, he was an enlightenment-kind-of-guy, who wanted to see for himself.

That is where faith comes into play. Believing something about Jesus because science supports it is not what faith is about. Something very different is required. The great nineteenth century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard anguished about what it meant to be a follower of Christ in a country that had an official state church. He used the metaphor, "the leap of faith," to describe becoming a follower of Christ. This phrase, a leap of faith, as the beginning point of a journey of faith, has always resonated with me. We will not get on that journey by applying the principles of science.

The Easter account of Jesus's resurrection is the most difficult place to begin the journey of faith. But it is where we must begin. What we proclaim about Easter is too mighty to be encompassed by the certainty science claims, too wonderful to be found within the boundary of our imagination. And yet, that is where we must begin. The promise of Easter is the occasion of our greatest doubts, but it can also be the source of our most profound faith.

Thomas' experience of touching the wounds of the risen Lord, is not what we need. We need the courage to take that leap and say, "Jesus, I'm with you. I'll follow you, and live the life you teach."

Throughout my youth, I was taught that doubting Jesus' resurrection was wrong, a sin, a sign of weakness and a betrayal of Jesus, a slippery slope that will become the road to perdition. But, I suggest doubting is just fine. We all engage in doubt if we take the good news of the gospel seriously. Faith involves doubts. That is what the word faith implies.

Committing to follow Jesus will take us on a difficult, challenging path. We'll need support, reinforcement, encouragement. That is why we gather in community with a people who have made, or are considering making, the same commitment and face the same challenges. It is why each Easter season, in the first service of Easter, we stop and are offered the opportunity to

renew our Baptismal Covenant by:

reaffirming our renunciation evil,  
renewing our commitment to follow Jesus Christ,  
persevering in resisting evil,  
proclaiming by word and example the Good news of God in Christ,  
continuing to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our self, and,  
striving for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every person.

Jesus did not condemn Thomas for initially doubting. When Thomas saw the risen Lord with the wounds, Thomas' response was one of the strongest declarations of faith recorded in the NT: "My Lord and my God!" Doubting Thomas? Good for him. And he seems to have lived out his life as a faithful follower of Christ.

But back to our plague. The Sociologist Rodney Stark has written about plagues and the early church in a book called "The Rise of Christianity".\* Plagues were numerous in cities of the Roman Empire. Cities such as Antioch, for example, were crowded by peoples from around the empire. All except the wealthy, lived in single room apartments with no heat, running water of sewage systems in buildings as tall as 5 stories. Half of all children died within a days of their birth. Earthquakes were a regular occurrence, and during the first century there were at least a half dozen major plagues. When a plague struck, the upper and middle class folks fled from the cities, abandoning even their own sick family members. But the poor could not flee. Christians decided not to flee and stayed in the cities, caring for those of all social classes who were ill. This willingness to stay and provide care made a strong impression on many non-Christians who decided they too would become followers of Jesus.

So Christianity's history has always involved life and service in times of plagues. We too can find ways to serve, beginning with following the guidelines for social distancing. I'm appalled, embarrassed and angered by those churches who refuse to follow these rules. These grandstanding churches are not icons of faithfulness; they are purveyors of dangerous nonsense.

Let's continue to honor the risen Christ by directly and indirectly caring and praying for those in need, and by following the sensible guidelines medical professionals and our governor have issued. And as we anticipate reopening our church, let's reflect on why we are part of a community of faith, and why worshiping together in our old sanctuary is important to us a community of faith.

Amen!

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\*Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity, Princeton University Press (1996)