

Sunday, April 16, 2023
The Second Sunday of Easter
John 20: 19-31

Good Morning,

I'd like to begin today's message with a story from the 19th century. Auguste Comte (a French philosopher) and Thomas Carlyle (a Scottish essayist) were having a discussion. Comte said that he was going to start a new religion that would supplant the religion of Christ. It was to have no mysteries and was to be as plain as the multiplication table. Its name was to be "positivism." "Very good, Mr. Comte," Carlyle replied. "All you will need to do will be to speak as never a man spoke, and live as never a man lived, and be crucified and rise again on the third day. And then get the world to believe that you are still alive. Then your religion will have a chance."

And, in the same way, Professor Charlie Moule, a famous theologian, once said, "The birth and rapid rise of the Christian church...remains an unsolved enigma for any historian who refuses to take seriously the only explanation offered by the church itself - the resurrection."

Many times I've gotten into discussions about other religions and the subject of what makes Christianity distinctive. How does Christianity differ from other religions? I always come to the same conclusion: the answer lies in the Easter story - no other religion has ever claimed that its leader rose from the dead. St. Paul - who was nobody's fool - had this to say about the centrality of the resurrection:

“For what I received, I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the Apostles - and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”
When you add that up, you get at least 514 men.

Have you ever therefore wondered why - if the resurrection is a central pillar of our faith - it is, afterall, central to our 3 main creeds:

- The Apostles Creed
- The Athanasian Creed, and
- The Nicene Creed

Yet St. John only mentions four post-resurrection appearances of the risen Jesus. How is that? In this chapter, John 20, we read of 3 of these:

1. Jesus’s to Mary Magdalene
2. Jesus’s appearance to all the disciples except Thomas
3. And finally, Jesus’s appearance to Thomas

And in the following chapter, John 21, we read of Jesus appearing to 7 disciples, including Peter, James, John, Thomas, Nathanael, and 2 unnamed disciples - and having breakfast with them.

Surely if the resurrection is such a big deal, why didn’t John add many more of the stories of these encounters? At the very least, why didn’t he simply catalogue when, where, and who had seen

the risen Christ? Surely that would have made an interesting read.

Have you ever wondered what the reaction of James, Jesus's brother, was when Jesus appeared to him? I wonder if Jesus appeared to Nicodemus (the Jewish Rabbi who had sought him out at night and who had helped Joseph of Arimathea bury Jesus).

I believe the reason that St. John doesn't record more "post-resurrection" encounters with the risen Lord is to be found in the last verse of our Gospel reading today:

St. John wrote -

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

In other words, these 3 stories of John 20 have been recorded to awaken faith in us.

So what is so special about these 3 stories? I would like to suggest that each story shows a barrier to faith - which can be overcome by the presence of Jesus. And they are all barriers that we, as Christians, will experience at some time in our lives.

1. The first of these barriers to faith was GRIEF.
2. The second barrier to faith was FEAR.
3. The third barrier to faith was DOUBT.

Let's go into detail:

*The first barrier to faith was GRIEF. And this was overcome by hearing the voice of Jesus. Mary Magdalene couldn't see Jesus

for her grief. It was only when she heard him call her name that she realized that he was risen. Jesus spoke to her - and by speaking, he released her from her grief. There are going to be times when we suffer grief. We may grieve for the loss of a loved one. And it is at this time that we need to listen for Jesus's voice calling to us.

*The second barrier to faith is FEAR. And this was overcome by experiencing the presence of Jesus. The disciples in today's gospel were gathered behind closed doors in fear. Jesus had been crucified - and when would they be next? And so Jesus comes to them and speaks words of peace. He showed them his crucified hand, and St. John records: "The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord."

Fear can cripple us at times. It can make us irrational. And at those times, we need to seek Jesus's presence in our lives - and it is his presence that will bring us peace.

When I get stressed out with worry and fear, I find wonderful comfort in the words of Jesus:

"Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light."

*The third barrier to faith is DOUBT. And this was overcome by the touch of Jesus. Thomas seems rather unfairly to have had bad press for the last 2,000 years. His name has even been entered into the English language. Someone who doesn't believe in something is called a "Doubting Thomas." But you have to remember that Thomas wasn't with the other disciples when they saw Jesus. He didn't have the benefit of what they had seen. He

couldn't believe that Jesus was risen - it was something outside of his experience.

Our faith is not an unreasonable faith. St. Peter tells us for example:

"Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have."

God has given us minds and wants us to use them.

Thomas, in rather flowery language, says, "I'm not going to believe until I can stuff my hand actually into his side." That's the force of what he is saying. Our faith must be based on a firm foundation. And Jesus realized that Thomas needed that confirmation. Once Thomas got the evidence he needed, he simply said, "My Lord and my God."

Thomas's comment wasn't simply an intellectual assent to the proposition that Jesus rose from the dead. A simple intellectual belief in the resurrection is not enough. When the Bible uses the term "belief," it means "faith that results in action." Let me repeat that again:

Belief = faith that results in action.

When Thomas believed, it drove him to his knees to confess, "My Lord and my God." What Thomas asked for was very reasonable, and so Jesus gave him what he needed for his faith.

There are times when we need a special touch from God. It is not a sin to be skeptical.

What is sin, is to go on disbelieving when you are given the evidence. Jesus deals with each person's needs differently. He treats us as individuals.

*Mary simply needed to hear Jesus's voice and her grief was healed.

***The disciples needed to receive the peace of Jesus in their lives to release them from their fear.**

***Thomas needed to see the risen Christ and his doubt was quenched.**

Each of us has different needs. We all ask different questions. But there is only one solution: a touch from the risen Lord. Amen