

Second Sunday of Easter — April 28, 2019

John 20:19-31

When our Pub Theology group met this week, one of the questions we took up was what holy day is the most important for Christians. Most of us agreed on Easter, though a credible argument was made for tying Christmas and Easter together, which makes sense. You can't have one without the other.

The church calendar answers this question unambiguously by placing Easter at the center, or on the pinnacle, of the church year. Christmas is certainly important with 12 days of celebrating, but Easter is celebrated for a whole 50 days. And of course, every Sunday, regardless of the season of the year, is considered to be a celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The resurrection is clearly central for us. Without the resurrection of Christ, there are no Christians, no Christianity, no Church.

A question our group ran out of time to discuss—which is unfortunate, because it's very important—is “How will you live differently today because Jesus lives?” If Jesus is risen from the dead, then there must be implications for us and for the community founded on his resurrection, the church. Today's gospel reading, always heard on the Second Sunday of Easter, gives us some ideas about that.

It is Easter evening. Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene that morning, and Mary faithfully bore witness to this to the other disciples. Mary is the first preacher, the first to share the good news of resurrection.

Unfortunately, the disciples do not believe her. In response to her sharing the good news, they have barricaded themselves in a room behind locked doors. Wow, what stunning confidence they have in what Jesus had promised!

Imagine their shock when Jesus appears in their midst despite the locked doors. Busted! Busted for their lack of faith. Busted for not believing Mary. Can you imagine their shame and guilt?

These members of Jesus' inner circle had sat at his feet as he taught them God's way of acceptance and love. They had observed his compassionate ministry with others. They had heard him speak of his dying and rising, heard him promise that love wins, not death.

And in the end they had not believed a word of it. They had deserted him at the foot of the cross, and now the locked doors speak volumes about their lack of faith.

It is important to hear Jesus' first words to these failed disciples as words of forgiveness. "Peace be with you." Those words do not mean, "Calm down." They mean, "I, your Lord and your God, forgive you." Jesus's very first word to the post-resurrection community is a word that forgives their hardness of heart, a word to which they respond with joy.

This word of forgiveness is meant not just for them but for all. For all who struggle to believe. For all who crouch in fear behind locked doors. For all who cannot trust that love wins but assume that death always and ever has the last word. "Peace be with you," Jesus says to us. "I forgive all your fears and failures."

Since Jesus is no longer with us in the flesh to speak this word of forgiveness himself, he entrusts the speaking to us. This is the first answer to the question "How will you live differently because Jesus lives?" Because he lives, we Christians, we the church, will always practice and proclaim forgiveness. This is the meaning of those puzzling verses about forgiving and retaining sins. It is simply the power entrusted to us by the risen Lord to be the community that is always offering forgiveness in his name.

Commissioned by the risen Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we offer peace and forgiveness to all — which means not only to those who look like us, or act like us, or think like us, or believe like us, but to all.

Poor Thomas was not there when Jesus first appeared to the group. He is not "doubting" Thomas. The word literally means "unbelieving." Thomas does not believe the testimony of his fellow disciples, just as the disciples had not believed Mary's testimony.

He wants to see for himself — not an unreasonable request. He simply asks for what the others have experienced, to see Jesus in the flesh. So Jesus does appear, but the text is ambiguous about whether Thomas actually made the careful physical examination of Jesus' body that he had proposed. We simply hear his confession of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus' next words, though addressed to Thomas, are meant for us: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

For every single believer who has come after Thomas, faith in the resurrection rests not on seeing —not, if you will, on physical evidence—but upon receiving and trusting the testimony of

others. For every believer since Thomas, our faith rests on the witness born by Mary and the disciples, who testified to what they saw.

There is no other way for us to believe. This is not to disparage or discount other ways of knowing like science or history. It is simply to say that there is no other way for us to know that Jesus is risen from the dead other than to receive and trust the testimony that has been handed down to us. And so, in answer to that question “How will we live differently because Jesus lives?”, we will be a people who continue to tell the story that we have received and transmit it to future generations.

It is the Holy Spirit who creates faith—who empowers us to trust what the story promises—but it is ever the responsibility of the community of believers to transmit the witness, to keep on telling the story.

We hear finally that Jesus did many others things in the presence of his disciples, but the things we read here in the Gospel of John were written down so that we might believe and have life in Jesus’ name. In other words, in response to the resurrection of Jesus, we have become a people of the book.

The church doesn’t live by oral tradition, or by a continuity of mystical experience. We do not await the wisdom of a guru or a sage to be revealed in every generation. We don’t rely on a continuity of feeling or experience. We have a book. We have a book that contains what we need for faith. We come to faith through encountering the signs of Jesus that are written down in our holy book.

How do we live differently because Jesus lives? We are a people who read the Bible. We are in every dimension a Bible-centered community. What we preach, what we teach, how we worship, the programs and ministries of the church need all to be rooted and grounded in scripture.

How will you live differently because Jesus lives? Maybe this Easter you will find a renewed commitment to reading and studying the Bible. Maybe you will resolve to come to worship more regularly, where the scriptures reliably have central place and the story is told anew every week. Maybe you will seek new ways of offering peace and forgiveness to those in your life who need it. Maybe you will go and share the story of Jesus with others, taking up your role as a witness to the resurrection.

So I set before you today a 50-day challenge—well, now actually a 43-day challenge since one week has already passed. I challenge you to discover in this Easter season how *you* will live differently because Jesus lives. Ready? Go.