

Sermon Easter 2, 24 April 2022

Acts 5:27-32

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

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Today is Low Sunday. The tension and stress of Holy week, followed by the joy of Easter day, are over and we settle to figure out where we are. Easter continues for a few more weeks until Pentecost at the beginning of June.

The disciples are in hiding behind locked doors, probably having heard that the women have met the risen Jesus and not sure if that could possibly be true when Jesus appears among them.

The first thing he says is, "Peace be with you." It is the thing that they most need at this point in time.

Often, as a Christian, I have sought to do the right thing and frequently fallen short. I have felt that I am responsible for carrying the load but actually I am not.

The disciples, after three years of being with Jesus, hadn't understood what he was really about. Thomas, who wasn't present when Jesus first appeared to the disciples, in some ways, was the closest.

In John 10:22 Jesus is in Jerusalem, at the Temple for the Feast of Dedication and the Jews demand to know if he is the Messiah. When he refuses to give a clear answer, they try to stone him, and he leaves Jerusalem to go to the Jordan. In John 11 they hear that Lazarus is ill. Jesus decides to go back to Judea, to Bethany, near Jerusalem where Lazarus is. But the disciples are not keen, "Rabbi, the Jews were just now trying to stone you, and you are going there again? " But Thomas' response is, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Not exactly encouraging if courageous.

Maybe that is why Thomas is absent. Possibly, he is taking the view that as Jesus has died then he is also prepared to die and so continues to go out and about.

The disciples, at Jesus' arrest, depart the scene. Peter tries to fight but is stopped by Jesus and Jesus is led away quietly not resisting at all. Peter follows, but denies that he even knows Jesus, 3 times, just as Jesus said he would. The disciple that he loved (thought to be John) is with the women at the cross,

possibly he is very young and so not thought of as a threat by the Romans and so is safe there). Of the rest, there is no mention.

After 3 years, I'd like to be sure that I would have had a few more clues, or would I? I suspect I would have run away as well.

With Jesus return, I might have expected that He might have had something to say about that. But no, just, "Peace be with you." Jesus is responding to their need.

Thomas when he hears that Jesus has appeared to the others declares that he wouldn't believe unless he could put his finger in his side and see the marks of the nails. He clearly thinks that the others have either gone mad or are experiencing some sort of mass hallucination.

Jesus, when he sees him, does not question his disbelief, but invites him to put his hand in his side and see the marks of the nails. He responds to Thomas' need.

Thomas responds by being the first disciple to answer, "My Lord and my God" acknowledging who Jesus actually is.

Jesus understands me, knows me, frequently better than I do myself and loves me, despite all my failures and ability to head off in my own direction.

The meditation for Thursday on the 24/7 app put it this way: I don't need to be strong enough to carry every pain and answer every question. That is what Jesus has done for me.

Jesus accepts me as I am and loves me. He also knows who I can become and as I grow closer to him seeks my growth, even as my body may grow frailer or my life busier.

Recently, I read a book by Rob Bell who you may remember put out a series of videos that we looked at, at various stages some years ago.

He has been a very successful leader of a very big church in USA, has written a number of books and been speaker at numerous conferences.

The book is called Everything is Spiritual. It tells his story of how he set up this very large church, his growing disillusionment with it and the demands on him to make it continue to grow and some of his discoveries along the way.

Sometimes he does big meetings and those who pay top dollar get the best seats and they get to speak to him for a couple of hours before the session begins.

He sits there and people can ask anything they want.

One day he is sitting there, and a woman in the front row says that she is struggling because her husband had recently committed suicide and how can anyone believe there is any ultimate goodness in the world when something like that happens. She is struggling with suffering and loss and God and believing and not believing after what she has gone through.

That certainly got everyone's attention. How do you answer that?

Rob puts his hand on his heart and waits a bit. He finds that he does more stopping and waiting and listening than he used to. He knows the answers, the examples, but he waits and listens. Then he asks the woman a question.

"Are you grieving two deaths? Your husband and your God." She nods. "Yes," she says, "That's what's happened."

Rob asks her if the God who doesn't let husbands kill themselves died when her husband died. "Yes," she says.

Rob tells her about his own experiences of his God dying. How Jesus on the cross says, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and his reflection on that.

He gives her an image that helped him. The Genesis creation poem of the Spirit hovering over the waters of chaos and then it enters the water and out of the waters creates something new. Something vast and expansive and beautiful and diverse.

The water of loss and pain and grief and wounds and not knowing what to do or where to go or how to deal with the agony of life and the Spirit hovers, waiting to bring something new out of it. It's why the people that most inspire us are those who have been through those waters.

As Rob listens and she talks, she says that she has seen some new and unexpected life coming out of this abyss.

The disciples, in Acts, go on to build the Christian church. Peter is no longer frightened to admit that he knows Jesus. He is prepared to stand and boldly declare it and what it means to him.

In the Acts passage, this is the second time that they have been arrested. They are jailed but an angel comes and frees them so the next morning they are back in the Temple teaching about Jesus and how the Jewish leaders had had him crucified. They are hauled back in front of the Jewish leaders. Peter's response is to preach the same sermon that he had been preaching to the people in the Temple. "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

The leaders want to kill him but Gamaliel, a Pharisee and teacher of Paul, stands up and speaks of all the other teachers who had caused trouble and were killed. Their followers dispersed and nothing more was heard of them.

If Jesus is simply a misguided human, nothing more will be heard of his followers. But if he is from God he will not be overthrown and forgotten, and they could be found to fighting against God.

The disciples could not believe what Jesus had been telling them about what would happen to him and the necessity for it because they did not understand who he was even though they had spent 3 years with him. Their understanding of God did not have room for Jesus. The man they spent time with was an amazing teacher and healer but their idea of who he was, was too small.

It wasn't until after his death and his resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit that they got it. Their old idea of Jesus had to die and it was painful but until that happened they could not see Jesus for who he really was.

Life as a Christian is not necessarily easy and can be more difficult than if we don't believe. The disciples, in the main after all, ended up dying for their belief.

And we will be challenged by other people but also by the events in our own lives. And those challenges can result in the death of our God not because God changes or is wrong, but because our concept of our God is too small, too contained.

In Revelation, the concept is vast as the writer can make it.

“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on account all the tribes of the earth will wail.

So it is to be. Amen.

‘I am the Alpha and the Omega,’ says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”

The Gospel of John begins with the reference back to Genesis, to the creation “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.” And the passage today ends with the purpose of the book “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.”

(Many people believe that this is the original end of John and that chapter 21 has been added on later.)

For me, my walk as a Christian has been one of many deaths, of dreams, of ambitions, occasionally those I love but also of my ideas about who God and who Jesus and the Holy Spirit are. My ideas are too small and I have to let them go so that a new and greater belief can grow, until that too becomes too small and has to be let go.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come.

Gradually I am creeping closer to that.

Amen.