

EASTER II (Low Sunday) 19 April 2020

A Homily preached by **the Reverend Roger B. White** in St Mark's Parish, Bridgewater, Connecticut

1 Peter 1.3-9; Psalm 16; John 20.19-31

Each year on the Sunday after Easter we hear those two conjoined stories from John's Gospel that we have just heard Priscilla read: the first is the story of Jesus' first post-Resurrection appearance to his closest male followers on the night after the first Easter when Thomas is not present. The second story is that of Jesus' next appearance to them, a week later and when Thomas is there.

This is John's Gospel: he tells things a bit differently than do Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and the first story we hear today is John's version of the Pentecost event, when Jesus bestows on his disciples his promised gift of the Holy Spirit. Unlike the more familiar Pentecost story that we will hear in a few weeks from Luke's writings, John's story takes place not fifty days after Easter in public, but at the end of Easter Day itself and in a private place. And, there are no tongues 'as of fire'; there is no explosion of voices speaking many languages and no rush 'as of a wind', but rather only Jesus' quiet words, 'Peace be with you', and the sound of his breath as he breathes on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'.

You see, in Luke's telling, the gift of the Spirit is to preach, to proclaim the Good News of the Resurrection in many languages, in words; in John's Gospel, the gift of the Spirit is the power to forgive, the gift of forgiveness. They are not contradictory but rather complementary understandings of what the Holy Spirit can work in Jesus' followers, in us, and in the world in which we live. Words and actions are how we can make known God's love for us and for the whole of the Creation through Christ Jesus.

But the second story that we hear today always attracts far more attention. It is the story of 'Doubting Thomas', and it has given Thomas the Apostle, from what we can tell in fact an impetuously loyal disciple of Jesus, a pretty unfortunate reputation.

'Doubting Thomas' is a byword for a sceptic, even a cynic. When the Church got around to assigning a feast day for Thomas, we chose 21 December, the longest and darkest night of the year --where doubt apparently leads you

And when parts of the Church decided that Jesus' mother Mary had been such a holy person, such an exemplar of obedience that she like Moses, Elijah, and Jesus himself must have gone bodily into God's presence in Heaven (unlike the rest of us), the legend quickly arose that Thomas was absent on the day of the Assumption, too. Once again he doubted what everyone else had seen; and, with a graciousness perhaps slightly tinged with annoyance, Mary took off her girdle --her belt-- and tossed it down to him as though to say, 'Yes, I am up here!'

Some people even say that the story of 'Doubting Thomas' points to a controversy somewhere in the very early Church between Christians who had been taught by John's followers and those who had been taught by Thomas's followers. They were at odds over whose understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus was the more authentic.

And the Gospel of John, which repeatedly refers to John as the disciple whom Jesus loved best, uses the story of 'Doubting Thomas' to undermine the credibility of Thomas's followers

Yet the story itself, as John himself tells it, is remarkable for Jesus' gentle and loving patience with Thomas's meat-and-potatoes way of thinking. Seeing for him is believing. And so Jesus, who as we heard last week had told the astonished Mary Magdalene who, when she recognized him at the door of the tomb tried with joy to embrace him, Do not hold me: I am different, things are different; I am moving on and you must also move on --this same Jesus tells Thomas, Peace be with you. Reach out and touch me. Believe. There is gentleness and understanding, nothing

to suggest a testy, 'Well glad you could show up this time'. There is only patience, love, and ... forgiveness for the inevitable and predictable doubter

And John the Gospel writer is clear. He tells us that after the Resurrection lots of amazing things happened to the disciples, too many to tell, so I am telling you some of the so that you will listen to them, think about them, wonder what they might mean, and might begin to believe along with the astonished Thomas.

For John, telling the stories again and again is how we preach what we have come to believe with words; and remembering over and over again how Jesus lived amongst other people --how he treated them-- is how we proclaim our faith through our actions. Jesus' love --sometimes gentle, sometimes fierce; Jesus' willingness to sacrifice, to be inconvenienced to say the least; and his quickness to forgive ... as we try these on in our own manner of living can speak as loudly as the stories, if not louder.

So, today, John's invitation to us is ... just tell the stories, embrace them more and more deeply, and then live what you believe. He also tells us that to begin truly to live is to forgive Amen.