

Acts 5:27-32

Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31

OPENER:

The Sunday after Easter can land with a bit of a thud: less fanfare, less flowers, less music, less people.

Statistics say that Episcopalians invite someone to church once every 17 years. I don't know if that's true—at least not here, at the Church of the Good Shepherd, people are always coming up to me introducing their neighbor, sister, friend, etc. But it's still a challenge, on this "Low Sunday", to hear these stories not as old news, but as Good News, and also as new News.

GOSPEL:

The word "Gospel" means: "Good News"—so it is something that comes from outside of us and appears. So, our faith is not, primarily, an argument, or a set of propositions or a theory to be tested, although it does make logical sense and it's helpful to put it to the test. Rather it's *news* that has washed up on the shore of a deserted island, where as castaways we celebrate its truth. The news is that there's water in the cove nearby, there's light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus has been raised from the dead.¹

How did the disciples respond to that news Easter? How did they experience that story, the Easter Event? I want to take a look at how they heard it, how Peter and Mary Magdalene and Thomas heard this Good News for the first time.

Then, thinking about what Christine preached on last week, how do we make it part of our story? How do we share it then to the world?

DISCIPLES

In a perfect world, with perfect disciples, that empty tomb, should have been enough. The events happened just as Jesus had prophesied, he was to be crucified, buried and resurrected after three days.

But it was not enough: although we don't hear how the news of the empty tomb was told to the remaining disciples, we do hear of a gathering in fear, behind locked doors.

¹ McDavid, William, Ethan Richardson, and David Zahl. 2015. *Law and Gospel: a Theology for Sinners (and Saints)*. 43-45.

Perhaps they had plans to spread the word, to start the Christian mission, but it seems that they were, at the very least in a state of shock, scared because the authorities were looking for them, or maybe just profoundly sad because of the death of Jesus.²

MARY MAGDALENE

After this, Jesus then *appeared* to Mary Magdalene, with instructions to inform the rest of the disciples of the appearance. Again, in a perfect world, with perfect disciples, the news coming from Mary Magdalene should have been enough to convince the disciples of the good news. But still all we have is that image of the Disciples, huddled together in a locked room.

If the Passion Narrative were the Disciples' Final Exam, then these post-Resurrection scenes were Summer School, remedial work, and they seemed to have failed that test as well. The story remained within them. They were not willing to testify or take the stand.

THOMAS:

That brings us to Thomas.

I have heard that there is something called the "CSI Effect" in modern day juries, where because of the popularity of the TV show, folks today need more physical evidence in deciding a case.³

Thomas could have been the foreman of those juries. He has the Modern, 21st century view of obtaining and processing information, of determining the Truth: "Trust but verify" "Put it in writing."

As a culture we continue to be gripped by such a demand for accuracy. The proliferation of TV shows and academic seminars related to the "search for Jesus" show that we are still right there with Thomas. And that's not a horrible thing, we are still searching, still looking for the scar. It's a reminder at the very least that we are no better or worse than the disciples themselves.

In that way, Thomas is our hero, the person willing to go whatever lengths he

² Howard-Brooke, 456.

³ <https://www.npr.org/2011/02/06/133497696/is-the-csi-effect-influencing-courtrooms>

had to in order to determine the reliability of the Resurrection appearances. He is the modern searcher, the inspector, the detective, sent back in time on our behalf to perform the dirty work for us.

Thomas required the “grossest and most palpable evidence”—neither a substitute body nor a spirit and, surprisingly Jesus “accept(s) the challenge of physical investigation.”⁴ This is also who we are, still poking and probing through our doubt, aching for contact with the Risen Christ.

PIVOT

Of course, in John’s account, the significance is that Thomas did not thrust his hands into sides of Jesus.

Jesus said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, without hesitation or going through with his request: “My Lord and my God!” the most accurate testimony about Jesus in all the Gospels.

PETER:

That gives us a great template, a model and example for how to do the “E” word “Evangelism.” That confession, that statement, sets the stage for all the rest of us to tell the story, the Easter story.

Peter in our reading from Acts, is giving one of the first sermons, the first defenses of the Christian faith. It’s a model of how to conduct an effective communication strategy to get folks coming to church, it’s his method for getting butts in the pews, it’s his small group formation, his potluck dinner, it’s the sum total of what all the Evangelism strategies can be reduced to in all the Low Sundays that have followed the glory of that Easter morning.

When challenged by the high priest, Peter doesn’t castigate, he doesn’t wag his finger. What Peter says does not seem to be particularly calculating. He doesn’t try to argue really. He proclaims the Easter truth: “You killed Jesus by hanging him on a tree, but the God of *our* ancestors, raised him up.”⁵

⁴ Barrett, C. K. 1978. *The Gospel According to St. John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text*. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Westminster. 572.

⁵ Acts 5.30

That's his evangelism tactic. He tells the story. He says: "I thought the play had 3 acts, but then there was a 4th. I thought the movie was over, and the credits were rolling, but then guess who shows up. I thought there was darkness, but there was light. I thought that there was death but then there was life." That's his method of convincing them and us of this cosmic reality that is as true as the sun coming up in the morning.

WITNESS:

In his words, he's simply a witness, to these things. He's not the prosecutor, he's not the defense attorney. He's a witness.

I have encountered some people in my life, some people, who are like that. Who can simply by their essence and nature, communicate that transcendence and love, the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Their life is a witness, it's like they have been put on the stand in the courtroom, and the totality of their life is a transcript of bearing God's light in the world.

Most of us are not Peter of this Acts Reading, we are Peter from before that, and we are Thomas from before. Luckily, Jesus shows up anyway, breaks down doors and walls and enters the secret chambers of our hearts.

CONCLUSION

However imperfectly, whenever we feel God's presence in our lives we are called, like Peter and Thomas, to share the story, to sing that song, to bear that truth.

Now more than ever, the stories that we tell about how we encounter Christ in our lives need to be shared in this broken world, to be shouted from the mountaintop and whispered in low voices.

Through the doubt, one believes because Jesus keeps showing up in our lives, in all sorts of ways. Jesus' presence forces us to proclaim the story, to testify, to echo the refrain across the ages: "My Lord, and My God"—to witness that that the "Lord is Risen Indeed."

AMEN