



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 2 (B)

God Is Light

[RCL] Acts 4:32-35, Psalm 133, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

God is light and in God, there is no darkness at all. When we walk in the light that is God, we have fellowship with one another. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! Amen.

On this first Sunday after Easter Day, our readings give us insight into how Jesus' death and resurrection were remembered by three early Christian communities. We have glimpses of how faith in Jesus was lived over the course of the first hundred years of Christianity, from the days immediately following his death and resurrection, to the early believers described in the Book of Acts, to the Johannine community at roughly the end of the first century. We can see that the astonishing news of the Resurrection elicits responses as diverse as the human beings who receive the news.

In today's gospel reading, John the Evangelist describes the reaction of Jesus' followers in the first days after the events of Holy Week and Easter. We might imagine those frightened and confused disciples as the earliest post-resurrection community. Seeking to regroup following the loss of their beloved leader, they have gathered in shock and despair. Imagine their astonishment and awe when Jesus, whom they have seen dead and buried, appears among them. Yet here is the proof: seeing the wounds in his hands and his side with their own eyes, they cannot disbelieve their truth. Jesus lives! Their response to the good news of the resurrection is God's peace, through the precious breath of the Holy Spirit. Their faith that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing they will have eternal life, is steadfast and secure.

Nevertheless, the news that Jesus is raised from the dead is difficult to wrap one's head around. Some have witnessed, but many have not, and Thomas shows us a different reaction to the good news. He cannot believe until he sees the proof with his own eyes.

Jesus is patient. He reappears. He reassures Thomas: Do not doubt, but believe. In this moment, we can see that God honors the wrestlers, the doubters, the honest response. Thomas, relieved and overjoyed, cries out in absolute faithful certainty: My Lord and my God! These earliest Christians, through different paths, have received the message: Jesus is Lord, Messiah, and bringer of salvation and eternal life.

The Book of Acts, which appears in our lectionary during the Easter season, is unique in the New Testament canon for offering a narrative of the life and work of the emerging early church in Jerusalem. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, and the dramatic coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter has boldly and confidently proclaimed that Jesus is Lord and Messiah. The response of the crowd is awe, and according to Acts 2, many were baptized. The language describing the growing community of believers is warm and beautiful. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common. Day by day, they worshipped and ate together with glad and generous hearts, praising God.

By the fourth chapter of Acts, the passage we read today, Peter has been brought before the Council, and seeing the proof of his power to heal, the assembled rulers, scribes, and elders cannot condemn him. The community of believers responds to this news with increased faith, filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking the word of God.

“With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.”

The response of the early church community to the news of the resurrection, delivered by eyewitnesses, is great grace and harmony. Sharing wealth, food, and worship in a communal setting is a graceful model of Christian community. The absolute certainty that Christ is Lord and Messiah, that he is one with God the Father as evidenced by his resurrection, and that his Word is Life is the glue that holds the early church, those first believers and converts in Jerusalem, together.

The third early Christian community that appears in today's readings is John's community, known as the Johannine community. A bit of background: The Gospel of John addresses an early Christian community, traditionally believed to be located in Ephesus in Asia Minor, now in modern-day Turkey. Ephesus had been the home of a substantial Jewish community from at least 300 BCE. At the end of the first century CE, a group of Jewish followers of Jesus existed within this Jewish community.

In the passage from John 20, when Jesus appears to the disciples, we find the door locked “for fear of the Jews.” There are historical reasons for John's language about the Jews. John wrote at a time when the Jewish followers of Jesus were carving out an identity separate from their parent Jewish community. The larger Jewish community, already diverse, could support followers of Jesus up to a point, but not as far as accepting that the human Jesus was one and the same as God. Affirming Jesus as the Messiah and savior of humankind was a step too far for many. And so, the followers of Jesus were beginning to be cast out of the synagogue.

John wrote, therefore, for a community in conflict. In today's passage, he describes the events in the earliest post-resurrection Christian community, for a community at the end of the first century – a community that could include doubters, not having witnessed the resurrection. Jesus' response, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” can be read as a rebuke from Jesus to Thomas.

At the same time, this response could be John's voice, preaching to his community, urging them to hold on to faith and hope in the absence of concrete proof of Christ's resurrection. John's purpose is clearly stated: "These [signs] are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

In the First Letter of John, we have a direct example of John writing to his community, the Johannine community, for the purpose of proclaiming that the word of life was revealed in Christ Jesus. John writes with absolute certainty, the boldness and power we heard in Acts:

"We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life-- this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us."

Possibly John is writing to the doubters. Surely, in every community, there will be multiple responses to the difficult questions raised by the presence of mystery. Joy, grace, and harmony will live side by side with confusion and doubt. We would hope that generosity, tolerance, and patience would take their place in our hearts as well.

To all the Johannine community, to all the earliest Christian communities, and to our community here gathered, John proclaims the good news of Easter. God is light, and in him, there is no darkness at all. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

Let us pray.

As we walk in the light as God is in the light, may we have fellowship with one another. May we believe with one heart and soul in our fellowship with the Father, with God's Son, Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit. May we rejoice in the revelation of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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