

The First Sunday after Pentecost: Trinity Sunday
June 7, 2020
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Genesis 1:1 – 2:4a
Psalm 8
2 Corinthians 13:11-13
Matthew 28:16-20

Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.

The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

This is Matthew's account of Easter Sunday ... well, the end of it anyhow. As Matthew tells it, two women named Mary – "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary" – went to the tomb on Easter morning.

And an angel came down. And there is no mistaking this angel for anything but a heavenly being.

His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him, the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid. I know that you are looking for Jesus ... He is not here; for he has been raised from the dead."

And the angel told them to go and tell the others to go to Galilee where they would see him.

And as the women ran to tell the others, Jesus greeted them. They worshiped him, falling at his feet. And Jesus told them what the angel has already said. Go and tell the others to go to Galilee where they would see him.

So that's what the women did. And (in a refreshing change) the disciples did as they were told.

And there, on the mountain in Galilee, the place to which they had been sent, eleven disciples – the 12, less Judas – see Jesus, the Risen One.

When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted.

It's a startling thing to say, that some of them doubted. Or perhaps better translated, there was some doubt in all of them. Startling, because the way Matthew tells it, there seems little room for doubt. But doubt made room, all the same.

Oh, but there's good news for us in that surprise. For their doubt matters not the least. Jesus, the Risen One, sends them on their way: to go; to baptize; to make disciples; to teach. Whether they understand who's standing there plainly right in front of them or not, they have work to do, and Jesus sends them on to do it.

And whether they fully understand what's going on or not, Jesus makes them a promise:

And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

This is Trinity Sunday. I've admitted to you in the past that I understand enough to know that it's pretty easy to step into one of the ancient heresies about the Trinity – Modalism or Tritheism or Arianism, to name just a few. I know enough to know how easy it is to step into heresy, but I'm not at all sure I know enough to avoid "stepping in it."

So I'm reassured by the way the Risen One responds to those who doubt in this morning's gospel. Their doubts, their uncertainties, their confusions, do not disqualify them in the least ... or any of us, I hasten to add. Whether I – whether WE – fully understand the theological ramifications of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, I have – WE have – work to do. And the Risen One will remain steadfast to the end.

Some doubted.

I'm reminded that the opposite of doubt is not faith. The opposite of doubt is certainty.

In any event, as I've said, the doubt (or doubts) of the disciples matter not the least to Jesus.

And in point of fact, I wonder if he'd have been as willing to send them on their way if they'd have been dead certain that they knew what he wanted them to do next. I wonder if they were better suited for their commission precisely because they weren't certain.

Frederick Buechner once said this about doubt:

... if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep.

Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving. ⁱ

Their doubts, their uncertainty, didn't disqualify those first disciples. Indeed, their doubts, their uncertainty, may have motivated them – like "ants in the pants" – to get curious about what they needed to remember, what they still needed to learn, if they were to keep faith with Jesus,

So maybe – before they set off to do those things Jesus told them to do – maybe they paused there, on a mountain in Galilee, and thought back to the first time they heard Jesus speak on a mountain in Galilee. (And for all we know, it could have been the very same mountain.)

It was early on in Jesus' ministry (in Matthew's telling of it, the first time Jesus spoke to a crowd in public). Jesus went up a mountain, there in Galilee. And he sat his disciples down to speak to them and to teach them. We call it the "Sermon on the Mount."

And we call the opening lines of that sermon the “Beatitudes.” Jesus gave honor – that’s what a “beatitude” is, that’s what the word “blessed” means ... Jesus gave honor to those pushed out to the margins of society:

Blessed are the poor in spirit ...

Blessed are those who mourn ...

Blessed are the meek ...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness ...

Blessed are the merciful ...

Blessed are the pure in heart ...

Blessed are the peacemakers ...

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake ...

Blessed are you when people revile you ... on my account ... ⁱⁱ

In his inaugural address, Jesus singled out for special honor those who had been pushed around, beaten down, and held down by the dominant culture ... the dominant culture being, of course, the social order of the Roman Empire, the *Pax Romana*.

But make no mistake, the *Pax Romana* was brutal; Rome was brutal in its imposition of law and order. Those in charge didn’t doubt their obligations to impose law and order; they were certain about their right to do so. (And their certainty was deadly.) Roman soldiers dominated the battlefield of every street in every city of the Empire. And those who presumed to speak up and act out in opposition were sure to be put back in their place ... by every means available and by any means necessary. Rome didn’t hesitate to call out soldiers against its citizens.

But in his first sermon, Jesus pointedly took the side of those on the margins, those held down, beaten down, pushed around. He told his disciples, there at the start, that these people matter; their lives matter. These are the kind of people the God of Israel honors – and they should too, for these people are children of the God who created the universe.

There’s an echo of our first reading in this:

“Let us make humankind” – in all its glorious diversity ...

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”

Oh, Jesus had a lot more to say in that first sermon, up there on a mountain. In one of the old red-letter editions of the Bible (this one being the one I was presented 32 years ago this past Tuesday, when I was first ordained), the red ink goes on for six dense columns of fine print. If you open this Bible and read, you’ll read what Jesus went to say. Seemingly without pausing to take a breath, the red print goes on for 38 more verse in chapter 5, all 34 verses of chapter 6, and the first 27 verses of chapter 7.

Jesus went on, without a break, to stress the importance of making sure the things we say and do line up with the things we profess to believe:

- It's not enough to not kill: offer no insults; cast no aspersions on any child of God; and make the effort to hear the grief and the grievances of those who claim that we've hurt them. (Whether we think we've done anything wrong or not, give them our time, make the effort to hear them out.)ⁱⁱⁱ
- It's not enough to not commit adultery: take care to nurture those who deserve our love; respect strangers on the street; look out for the wellbeing of women and children too quickly cast aside, written off, and left to fend for themselves.^{iv}
- Beware of practicing your piety before others, in order to be seen by them: give generously, but not for acclaim; pray earnestly, but not for show.^v
- Oh, and when you pray, Jesus went on to say, don't make it a theatrical performance; pray simply something like this: "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." (... as in heaven, yes, but heaven was always a given; the point is to pray for God's kingdom and for God's will to be done here on earth.)^{vi}

Jesus had a lot more to say up there on that mountain in Galilee that first day he preached in public. And maybe his disciples, standing with him on a mountain in Galilee, thought back to those words ... and maybe they then thought back to all the other things Jesus said to them and showed them about life and God and love and living together as God dreams for us to live.

And if they were at all unsure about themselves, they would certainly have remembered what Jesus said one occasion when the religious leaders asked him, "Teacher, which commandment in the Law is the greatest?"

He didn't hesitate; Jesus simply said, "'Love the Lord your God with all your passion and prayer and intelligence.' This is the most important, the first on any list. But there is a second to set alongside it: 'Love others as well as you love yourself.'"^{vii}

It's as simple and as challenging as all that.

Preaching last Sunday for the National Cathedral, Michael Curry spoke of the challenges of keeping the faith in a time of pandemic, made more challenging by current events:

This past week, we have not only had to endure a pandemic occasioned by a virus, a viral pandemic, but we've had to endure and face a spiritual pandemic. The roots of self-centeredness where one person can look upon another person and despise and reject them, and not even behold them as a fellow child of God. We have seen once again the unthinkable become thinkable ...

In Minnesota, the killing of George Floyd was a violation of basic human decency and dignity. And we all saw it. We all saw it. Maybe the deeper pain that comes with that is that that wasn't an isolated incident. It happened to Breonna Taylor on March 13th in Kentucky. It happened to Ahmaud Arbery on February 23rd in Georgia. And need I mention Melissa Ventura, Paul Castaway, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Trayvon Martin? This is a painful path that we have been on for a long time. We've made such progress in our human relationships and in our racial relationships, and yet this seems not to have changed at all.

And we might begin to doubt that anything will change. And Michael Curry acknowledged the reasons why we might doubt we're up for the challenge.

But if this is so, this scene from this morning's gospel suggests that our doubts, our uncertainties, matter not the least to Jesus, the Risen One. Jesus sends us forth to do what we can. The Risen One will remain steadfast with us through whatever lies ahead.

And our Presiding Bishop, for his part, remains hopeful and encouraging. And so I'll leave him with the last word here this morning:

If I make room for you, and you make room for me, and if we will work together to create a society where there is room for all of God's children, where every human being, every one of us is treated as a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, where everybody is loved, everybody is honored, everybody is respected, everybody is created as a child of God. If we work together to build that kind of society and don't give up, then love can save us all.^{viii}

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, on "Doubt," in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1973), p. 20.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:1-11.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 5:21-26.

^{iv} Matthew 5:27-31.

^v Matthew 6:1-6.

^{vi} Matthew 6:7-13.

^{vii} Matthew 22:31-40 (*The Message*).

^{viii} Michael Curry @ <https://episcopalchurch.org/posts/publicaffairs/presiding-bishop-michael-currys-pentecost-sermon-live-streamed-service> -- accessed June 4, 2020.