

Easter 2 Year C
John 20:19-31
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In Luke's account in the Book of Acts the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples on the feast of Pentecost. This moment transformed a small group of bewildered men into an organized Community that went into the world proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ in terms that all the people of the Mediterranean basin could understand. Evidently St. John did not get the memo. For here in his gospel the disciples receive the gift of the Holy Spirit on the very night of the resurrection, together with this remarkable statement from Jesus: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Our own Bible includes two "Pentecost" moments - not just one, and they cannot be reconciled at the level of history. Those determined to preserve the historical accuracy of the New Testament argue that the Spirit came twice, and I imagine God is aware that redundancy in critical systems is valuable, but on the whole I believe this solution to the problem of two arrivals of the Holy Spirit is unlikely. It isn't that both happened as presented, or that one happened and one didn't. It is I suspect that neither happened as presented, something else is going on, and it is that something else I want to talk about this morning.

Among the very few undoubted facts we have about the early church is that in the wake of the execution of Jesus the people who loved him most and followed him longest went to the the Romans who crucified him and the Jews who refused to follow him, declaring that they were loved, forgiven, accepted, children of God and inheritors of God's realm. That is a weird thing to

do, by any standard, and what it means is that these followers of Jesus began almost immediately after Jesus' crucifixion to present themselves to the world in much the same way Jesus had presented himself to the world. They saw themselves, in other words, as a community whose purpose was to embody the life and ministry of Jesus in the world.

What happened, as I see it, is that the disciples realized that their experience of Jesus was an experience of God, and therefore it did not occur to them flee for their own lives, nor did it occur to them to seek revenge for the death of their leader. The only course of action that made any sense at all was to become a community that by word, deed, presence, extended the life and presence of Jesus into this world even after his death, and that included forgiving everything, even the crucifixion of Jesus, just as Jesus himself forgave his condemners and executioners. Both biblical stories about the coming of the Holy Spirit make this point, but of the two, John's is more clear in two ways.

In John the Holy Spirit is in the whole community, not simply in each individual member of it. The story John wrote about Thomas shows this. When Jesus appears to Thomas eight days after he appeared to the rest of the disciples he does not say to him; "receive the Holy Spirit." He didn't have to, because by virtue of his membership in the community of the disciples he already had received the Spirit, and therefore the task was simply to make him aware of what he already had as a member of that community. Thomas was already living into the extension of the life of Jesus into the world, but he didn't know it. Thus, this story was never about "doubting Thomas," he is a symbol, a remarkably important one at that, and John makes this clear in the exchange between Thomas and Jesus: "you believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." That, people, is about all of us, for we are the people

who have not seen, and yet we are the people who are called to believe that the Spirit and presence of the Risen Christ lives in the community God formed to embody the life, presence and ministry of Jesus in this world now, today, whether “today” is sixty years or nearly two thousand years after his death. Blessed are you when you believe that you are part of the community that God formed to bring the life and presence of God to the world in the same way Jesus did. Blessed are you, in other words, who believe that we, together, as a community of the baptized, were formed by God nearly two thousand years ago into the risen Body of Christ.

This story, in other words, is not about doubting Thomas, it is about doubting Bill, who looks at the world and the Church the way both of them are, and wonders “How can that possibly be? How can this community possibly represent the life and presence of Jesus in the world now in the same way he represented himself in the world so long ago?” I have been wrestling with the question for a very long time, and I have yet to come up with answer, at least not a full answer, but I have a few rudiments of an answer.

It starts with abandoning the notion that joining the Church puts me on the right side of God and assures my my own private place in God’s favor, and embracing instead the truth John proclaimed to his community through the Thomas story. We are not in this for ourselves, we are not in this to explain to the world why God accepts some people and rejects others. We are in this instead to proclaim the unconditional love of God for all people because all people are one before God. We may argue vehemently against some points of view and for others - as Paul did against Peter - but to the extent we dehumanize others for any purpose whatsoever we are missing our call to extend the life and presence of Jesus into this world. On the other hand, to the extent that we proclaim and incarnate our embrace of the full humanity of all people, and

their essential worth, we are at that same moment fulfilling our call to extend the life and presence of Jesus into this world. The world as a whole continues to reject that notion altogether, and chooses to believe instead that some people are a great deal better than others, and a few are not even really and truly human. So, to fulfill our call as the Body of Christ, we will encounter opposition as certainly as both the earliest Church and Jesus himself did.

That message of unconditional love is consistent with the cross itself. In the cross, for those who believed, the power and presence of God was revealed as being in the one persecuted and killed, not in the ones doing the persecuting and killing. Nothing has changed. As the Body of the Risen Christ it falls to the Church to declare that if you want to see the presence of God in this world today, right now, do not look at the persecutors, look at the persecuted. Do not look at the ones doing the killing, no matter how noble they claim to be, look at the ones being killed. There you will see the presence of God, in the ones persecuted, in the ones killed. Paul called this “The scandal of the cross.” It is an apt phrase, for it was a scandal then, and it remains a scandal now. But as the Body of Christ, formed by God -let me say transformed by God - how can any other course of action occur to us? How can we be in this world anything other than what the first Jewish people who came to believe in Jesus, crucified and risen, were in their world?

The answer of course is that, really, it is not that hard. Try it sometime. For we too, as they themselves did, get overwhelmed by the inertia created by the world as it is. We too side with the persecutors from time to time, not simply to stay out of trouble with them but because the persecutors can be very persuasive. We too side with the killers from time to time, for there are moments when killing feels virtuous, even holy. The Church, as we know, has periodically

lost its way. Because we have not seen there are times when we have demonstrated through our actions that we do not truly believe we are the Body of Christ.

Yet, the God who formed us is always calling us back to our original purpose, not as a group of individuals who happen to agree on something, but as a body, The Body of Christ, whose purpose is emphatically not to assure its own members that they are some sort of special and preferred class of people, but to be collectively in this world today what the first followers of Christ after his death were in their day, the body that embodies the presence of God to this world now as Jesus presented God to the world then. We have not seen, not one of us, and yet, by the power of God we can believe, and so be that Body here and now.