



SERMONS THAT WORK

Easter 2 (A)

Faith: More than a Five Letter Word

[RCL]: Acts 2:14a,22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

Let us pray: Alleluia! Christ is alive and well. We pray today that we will shake away the doubt that traps us in a world of fear and celebrate that we have a great high priest who has risen from the dead to give us steadfast hope and eternal salvation. I pray in the name of one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The readings for the second Sunday of Easter feel like a bit of a time warp between two distinct periods in history. The Gospel of John is told in real-time, as we witness the disciples on the evening of Easter Sunday holed up in an upper room in great fear. In the Acts of the Apostles, the writer provides a historical account of the resurrection of the Lord to inspire future generations of his great witness and presence among us. In order to grasp the Lord's presence following the crucifixion, human senses must be employed, followed by a great dose of faith.

We are amid a world-wide challenge at the moment, as people everywhere worry about the effects of the coronavirus on their communities. There are strong recommendations from medical experts that require a dynamic shift, affecting the way we use our senses. "Don't touch your face" is an often-repeated admonition. If you see anyone sneezing or coughing, be intentional about stepping away from them. In church, you may need to forego the taste of wine for a while and experience the Holy Eucharist through bread alone. Try elbow bumps instead of shaking hands. So many familiar customs are being replaced, at least temporarily. All these measures are designed to keep as many people as possible healthy and free of the virus.

The Easter story is one that challenges the senses as well. The disciples still cannot believe their eyes when they go to the tomb and find it empty. After Mary Magdalene saw that the stone had been rolled away, she was struggling to understand what had happened. She saw a man standing in front of her, offering solace, but blinded by her tears, she couldn't see who it was. Once she heard the Lord's voice, she was able to tell the others of his resurrection.

The sighting and reporting were not enough for the men; Simon Peter and another disciple decided to go and see the tomb for themselves. Sure enough, just as Mary had said, the tomb was empty, save the linens in which Jesus had been wrapped. They could see and feel the material that had clothed the savior three

days prior, but that was it. No doubt they could still smell the fragrances from the spices used when placing Jesus in the tomb. All their senses, however, could not deter their sensibilities that something worse had happened to Jesus – and they were afraid that something awful was imminent for them, as well. Yet what can be worse than death?

Thankfully for all of us, Jesus does not allow the story to end there. With four simple words, Jesus sets to comfort and reassure the group that they are going to be alright and that they are not alone. “Peace be with you,” were the words they heard as Jesus appeared before them. Understanding that their faith was shaky, Jesus shows them the wounds in his hands and side. He breathed on them and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit. Christ went to his people to let them know that they had not been abandoned.

The Apostle Thomas missed that interaction with Jesus, and so as they recounted it to him, it sounded especially fantastical. He just could not believe that the Lord had somehow been returned to them physically, even if only for a brief moment.

Many people struggle with the continuing presence of Jesus following his resurrection and, like Thomas, are always looking for proof. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is reported to have said, “Take the first step in faith. You don’t have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” Jesus appeared again in that small room where the disciples were gathered to make a point of visiting Thomas. When our hearts are open, we are able to receive the presence of the risen Christ. The Lord God is with us in the happiest times and the darkest moments.

We can bear witness to the living God because of those who saw him. The disciples attested to the resurrected Jesus, first by their confusion at the tomb, and then by providing evidence of the resurrected Christ through his two visits. They were able to tell others about the wounds in his body. Even Doubting Thomas could tell the story, because Jesus ensured that his wondering friend had the proof that he needed in order to fully believe.

Faith, beloved, is more than a five-letter word. It requires the use of our senses. It requires us to hear God and to feel the Holy Spirit within us. The faith that Jesus tried to inspire in his disciples is the same faith God wishes for his modern-day followers. While we may never personally see the marks imposed by those awful nails, we know through faith that Jesus rose from the dead to save us. Jesus lived among us, fully knowing us and loving us in the most human terms. Crucifixion led to the salvation of all believers.

As resurrection people, faith is what guides us to live the kind of lives that Jesus envisioned when he preached. He spoke about love and forgiveness and motivated his disciples to preach that message of deliverance to everyone. Through those messengers, you faithful believers have an ability to trust in a triune God that wants the very best for you. There is a recognition that we all will fall short of the goal sometimes; everyone has a Thomas moment. Doubt sets in occasionally for the most devout human. Moments of anxiety can lead to questioning the very existence of God. In times of death, it can be difficult to hold on to the promise of eternal life with Christ. God hears the cries of his people and will always

endeavor to make his presence known. The forgiving God remains present for as long as it takes the skeptic to believe and to receive the gift of grace. God offers the opportunity every day to begin anew.

Doubting Thomas is a reminder that God understands those who question what happened to Jesus after he was placed in the tomb. Like King David who said, “You will make me full of gladness with your presence,” the message going forward is that it is beautiful when we can believe what we have not seen. Faith is a potent source of power, especially in times of fear and uncertainty.

In his sermon to the community, Peter recounted the extraordinary resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He died and was placed in a tomb like an ordinary human. Yet Jesus was no ordinary man and the tomb was not his final destination. On the third day, Jesus was raised from the dead by God. Christ visited with the disciples for them to carry the news of the death and triumphant victory over the grave to the rest of humanity.

As we continue to celebrate these great fifty days of Easter, we are encouraged to leave our rooms of fear, wrap ourselves in the love of the risen Christ, and boldly proclaim that Jesus is alive and will be with us until the end of the ages. Alleluia!

The Rev. Kathleen Walker is the missioner for black ministries in the Diocese of North Carolina. She works from the diocesan house in downtown Raleigh. She joined the bishop’s staff in 2020 to focus on the vitality of historically Black congregations by helping to weave their diversity into a closer bond of inclusion with other parishes and the diocese. The goal is to ensure all predominantly Black congregations have the best opportunity to make the fullest use of the resources of their parishes, partnerships, and the diocese. Rev. Kathy graduated from Virginia Theological Seminary in 2018 and shortly thereafter joined the clergy team at St. John’s Episcopal Church in Tallahassee, Florida as associate rector for pastoral care and parish life. She is originally from South Florida and was an active layperson in that diocese prior to discerning the call to ordained ministry.