

Community Presbyterian Church
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon

May 1, 2011

Acts 2:22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

"The Writing on the Wall"

Pastor John Guthrie

A kindergarten teacher gave her class a "show and tell" assignment. Each student was instructed to bring in an object to share with the class that represented their religion. The first student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Benjamin and I am Jewish and this is a Star of David." The second student got up in front of the class and said, "My name is Mary. I'm a Catholic and this is a Rosary." The third student got in up front of the class and said, "My name is Tommy. I am Presbyterian, and this is a casserole."

Among the many terms adopted by the church over the years, there is one applied to the Sunday after Easter. It is called "Low Sunday." I suppose it got that name because after the high of Easter Sunday, the Sunday afterwards is pretty low. Or maybe it's because attendance is pretty low on Low Sunday.

I would argue rather emphatically, however, that every Sunday, including today, is a high Sunday. In fact, another common understanding among church scholars is that we should remember the resurrection every Sunday.

It is resurrection day. The disciples, less Judas, who has left the group, and Thomas, who is off somewhere else, are gathered in a room in Jerusalem, with the doors securely locked. The text says that they were afraid of the Jews, meaning, as is nearly always the case in John's gospel, the religious leaders of the Jews. Perhaps they thought the scribes, Pharisees, lawyers, and chief priests would now come after them, since they had been successful in eliminating their leader.

But, of course, they weren't really sure any more that their leader had been eliminated. Peter and the disciple called, "the disciple whom Jesus loved," had gone to the tomb in which Jesus had been buried, and found it empty. And furthermore, they had heard from Mary Magdalene that she had actually seen Jesus, and he had spoken to her.

If you were in that room, what conversation can you imagine going on? One might say: "We saw him die. The soldiers knew he was dead. He is dead. The chief priests have taken his body. Mary must have been seeing things in her grief. He is dead. We need to go back to Galilee and resume our lives. We need to pray that the Pharisees will not come after us. He was not the Messiah. He was not the Son of God, in spite of all his words about being one with the Father, and how when we saw him, we saw the Father. He is dead, and we should go home."

Another might respond, "But remember Lazarus. Lazarus was dead, and Jesus raised him. Maybe he has been raised, too. He told us that he would be."

And still another might chime in: "He promised us an Advocate, the Holy Spirit. He promised us he would not leave us orphaned. He told us that we must abide in him, that we must remain connected to him like a branch to a vine. He said that for a little while we would not see him, but then we would. Could that mean he is really living?"

Then suddenly, even though the doors are locked, there he is, standing among them. What is the first thing he says? "Peace be with you." Shalom Aleichem. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." First, a greeting of peace. Then a commission. Jesus shows his friends the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound of the Roman spear in his side.

John says that Jesus then breathed on his disciples and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

We remember that Jesus promised an Advocate, the Holy Spirit, one to work alongside them after he has left. We are also reminded of the way in which the LORD breathed life into the man, the LORD's new creation, in Genesis 2. We are reminded of the story in Ezekiel, chapter 37, in which old dry bones representing the people of Israel, are given flesh and life when breath from the LORD enters them. Breath from God brings life.

Jesus says to the gathered ten something odd and a little disturbing: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." Certainly Jesus is telling the disciples that forgiving is now a part of their work. That the love which he has commanded them to practice includes forgiving others when they cause injury. But more than that, it helps to remember that very often in John's gospel, sin is equivalent to rejection of the message about who Jesus is: to reject Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God is to commit an egregious sin.

So perhaps Jesus is telling his disciples that they are to go and spread the gospel. That some who hear it will believe, and some will not. But regardless, they are to bear no grudge against those who do not believe, but continue to testify through the power of the Holy Spirit, and leave the results of their testimony to the Spirit.

Perhaps Jesus stays with the ten for a little while, talking further, but at some point he leaves them. When Thomas arrives at the room, the ten tell him, "We have seen the Lord." Just as Mary told all of them, "I have seen the Lord." But Thomas will not believe. Not, he says, until he touches the wounds in Jesus' hands and side.

Jesus appears in the locked room again, one week later, when Thomas is there. He again says to them, "Shalom Aleichem. Peace be with you." He invites Thomas to touch his wounds. "Do not doubt," he says. "Believe." Even though Thomas has said

he will not believe until he touches the wounds, he never does. He falls to his knees and cries, "My Lord, and my God."

Jesus replies, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." He will not continue appearing to the disciples who follow these disciples and the ones who follow them. He does not appear to us, or at least most of us, in physical form. We are not invited to touch his horrible wounds. We are simply called to believe.

No one has ever said that belief would be easy. We are asked to believe something none of us has ever seen, that a man was raised from the dead. And not just any man, but the man who called himself the Son of God and the Messiah. We are asked to believe that he is who he says he is. And beyond just an intellectual acknowledgement, we are called to trust in him. To accept the peace, the shalom, that he offers. And then we are asked to go and tell the world, in word and in deed, that he is not dead, that he is God, that he can be trusted. That in him is life, the only true life.

No one says that it is easy. One pastor¹ has noted a bumper sticker that was popular, at least several years ago, and possibly still, especially in the Bible belt where the Guthrie's lived a few years ago: "The Bible says it. I believe it. That settles it." This pastor notes that you never see bumper stickers that say, "The Bible has a lot of hard teachings that I am struggling to understand." But that's the reality of the Christian life. We have to struggle with a lot of things we are asked to believe.

But we do not struggle alone. Jesus breathed the Holy Spirit into the disciples in that locked room, and Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into us, repeatedly. We are not left orphaned, but he is with us and the Spirit is with us, as we go into the world to tell the world about him.

As you leave this worship space you see his words inscribed on the wall above the doors. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." A reminder that we have been given his peace, but that we don't get to rest in that peace. Instead, we are sent. We are also apostles, because that is what the word means: "ones who are sent."

We are given Christ's peace. And we are commanded to spread that peace to the world, by a living Lord, not a dead one.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

¹ Brett Younger, <http://www.goodpreacher.com/backissuesread.php?file=5094>.