

How Will We Respond?

I speak to you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is always with us and calls us to act in His name.

Good morning! I am delighted to speak to you this morning! But first, I would like to offer my thanks. As you know, I am a deacon candidate in the Episcopal Diocese of Washington, serving as an intern at Redeemer through the end of July. I am here to learn. I am grateful for the warm welcome you have offered me, and especially, for everything you are teaching me here. My experience at Redeemer has already impacted my formation as a deacon and my discernment of the ministry to which I am called. It is a gift that you are giving me every day, and I thank you for it.

I'd also like to thank Cricket for the opportunity to preach on this important second Sunday of Easter. Why important, you may wonder? Isn't Easter Sunday, and the Resurrection, the seminal event - the highest point of the church year? True!

But it is the second Sunday of Easter that launches the liturgical season of Easter in earnest. We don't often think of Easter as a season, but it is, and it is an important season for us. The next Seven Sundays, the fifty days before Pentecost, is the period in which Christians really begin to grapple with the life-altering reality of the resurrection and its meaning for our daily lives.

And as we see in today's Gospel, it is not so easy for human beings to grasp. But in this passage, John gives us important indications about what the resurrection means for us as followers of Jesus. Indications which give us hope and direction and inspire us to action. Indications to consider thoughtfully as we move through this contemplative season of Easter.

Evening is falling on Sunday, the first day of the week, three days after the Crucifixion. Mary Magdalene, the first person to whom Jesus appeared at the tomb that morning, has already run to the disciples, at Jesus' instruction, and joyfully announced "I have seen the Lord." But her words fall on deaf ears. Far from rejoicing at her astonishing message, the disciples are cowering - there's no other word for it - cowering in a locked room, afraid for their lives.

Imagine how they felt. The previous week had been disorienting and exhausting, physically and emotionally - filled with jostling crowds, tumultuous emotions, mounting tension. Angry clashes with the authorities, deepening uncertainty and dread about what was happening, and why. Rank betrayal by one of their own. And then, for their beloved leader and teacher, brutal violence, bloody torture, humiliation and intense suffering - all ending in the shocking reality of the crucifixion.

He whom they loved, of whom they had hoped so much, nailed to a Roman cross in the company of criminals on a desolate hillside. And then - nothing. He was dead. He was gone.

Every disciple was grappling with the shock of Jesus' death in the locked room that evening, but every disciple, I am sure - not just Peter - was also struggling within himself. Facing up with deep shame to his own equivocal behavior in Jesus' final hours. Confronting his lack of loyalty. His surrender to gut-wrenching fear. His cowardly flight and concealment, and utter abandonment of Jesus, in Jesus' darkest hour. And continuing terror about what might happen next, to all of them.

It must have been the worst day of their lives. No wonder they were huddling in the dark, behind locked doors. No wonder they had difficulty accepting, even hearing, the improbable message Mary had delivered.

And in this moment of complete devastation, a miracle. Jesus suddenly stands among them. No ghost, but a real human being. He offers his peace - and he shows them his hands and his side. Then, and only then, John tells us, do the disciples recognize the Lord and rejoice.

But then, John does something odd. He tells us the same story again, but this time, with specific reference to the disciple Thomas, who was not present in the room when Jesus first appears. Thomas, who, in my opinion, has suffered unfair reputational damage through the years - for a lack of faith that the other disciples also demonstrably shared.

So here we are again, fully a week after the disciples have seen Jesus for the first time, and they are still behind closed doors, still uncertain about what all this means for them, still afraid. This time, Thomas is with them. Thomas has stubbornly told the other disciples he does not believe when they tell him “we have seen the Lord” - just as the other disciples did not believe Mary Magdalene. Thomas is explicit that he will not believe unless he sees the marks of the Crucifixion - just as the other disciples did not finally recognize the Lord until Jesus showed them his hand and his sides.

And then, again, Jesus appears! Again, Jesus offers his peace and shows Thomas his wounds, even offering Thomas the opportunity to touch them. And Thomas now, too, recognizes Jesus - not only as “my Lord” but also as “my God.” John is the only Gospel that identifies Jesus directly as God, and Thomas is the one privileged to make this important declaration.

What is John trying to telling us, what is he reiterating to us, about our God, in telling us the story twice?

John is assuring us that Jesus, God, is always with us. That he fully offers himself to us. That he brings us his grace, forgiveness and peace - even in our moments of greatest weakness,

despair, sorrow, fear, personal failure, humiliation or shame. That behind whatever locked doors are shutting us off from life - fear, inadequacy, anger, lack of faith - and we all have them - Jesus is always with us and brings us peace.

Jesus neither censures nor castigates the disciples for their lack of loyalty, their lack of understanding or their lack of faith. Not one word of shame or blame. He simply invites them to believe, and kindly meets them where they are, in all their human weakness and human skepticism, offering them peace and even the “proof” they need, as limited human beings, to comprehend the mind-boggling reality of the resurrection - while gently reminding them, and us, that those who have not seen, but have come to believe, are blessed.

Jesus, here, shows us exactly what our God is like. He offers us great hope in God’s complete grace and faithfulness to us, notwithstanding our human limitations.

But John delivers another crucial message, one that I believe is particularly relevant as we enter this year’s season of Easter.

John tells us that immediately after the disciples, finally, recognize and rejoice in the presence of their Lord, Jesus breathes on them, recalling the breath of God breathing life into creation. In breathing on the disciples, Jesus gives them new life, empowering them with the Holy Spirit. And Jesus then immediately announces that “as the Father sent me, so I send you.”

John’s is an economical Gospel, leaping from resurrection to Pentecost in just two lines! But this immediacy leaves no doubt as to what God expects of us. We are God’s people, empowered and sent to follow Jesus and share in his mission to bring in God’s kingdom. We believe, and believing, we are called to act. As our collect today states: we are called to show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith. But how?

I'd like to suggest one framework we might use, individually or corporately, to seek this understanding and direction for our lives in this particular season of Easter, in 2018, when our nation and our faith face a moment of unusual challenge, demanding, in my view, a response from the people of God.

On Palm Sunday, after a period of discernment throughout Lent, Presiding Bishop Michael Curry and 22 other faith leaders issued a statement entitled "Reclaiming Jesus: A Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis." These leaders believe that we are living a dangerous and polarizing moment in our nation and that we face a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership in both our government and our churches. And they believe we need to do something about it.

They state "we believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Christ." They offer six core affirmations of what we believe as Christians, and six rejections of practices and policies by political leaders which contravene these beliefs and threaten the public integrity of our faith.

The signers commend their message for a process of prayer, study and reflection to pastors, churches and especially, young people - whom they note are watching and waiting to see what the churches will say and do at such a time as this. The hope is that many churches and faith communities will offer a fresh confession of faith and action on Pentecost, after this process of discernment during the season of Easter.

I share the concern expressed by Presiding Bishop Curry and the other signers of this statement. I too am looking for the response of the church. But the church, after all, is all of us. I would willingly engage in a process of discernment with the aim of action as they suggest. And I would do so with great hope.

Hope, because in the face of so many challenges to what we believe today, not only individuals but our society more broadly is increasingly restive and active, in a positive way, on more and more fronts, in support of values Christians, and not only Christians, hold dear.

We need only look to the truly inspirational leadership of our young people in the March for Our Lives movement to prevent gun violence. They are doing God's work. And to the ACT to End Racism Campaign launched just this week in Washington by the National Council of Churches, on the anniversary of Martin Luther King's death. To the expected launch this June of the New Poor People's Campaign. To the "Me Too" and Black Lives Matter movements. And to the Reclaiming Jesus Campaign just launched by faith leaders urging that we reclaim the values of Jesus in our national life.

Perhaps you are thinking, as I close today, that this message takes us pretty far from the Gospel story of that locked room on Easter evening, but I don't think so. In that locked room, Jesus revealed the meaning of the resurrection. The message of that story is that our God is always with us - but our God calls us to be with God, too. God calls us to act in his name. He empowered the disciples, and he empowers us, with the Holy Spirit, and he sent the disciples, and he sends us, to share in the mission of bringing in the Kingdom. The liturgical season of Easter invites us to consider - how will we respond?

Amen

Anne Derse, delivered at the Episcopal Church of the Redeemer, April 8, 2015