

2nd Sunday in Easter – 2024

St. Brice's Anglican Church

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." (John 20: 19)

Dear friends in Christ,

I am delighted to be with you this morning to celebrate Holy Eucharist and to offer the sacrament of Confirmation on the candidates, as well as to welcome new members into the Anglican Communion. It was so good to spend time with you this morning prior to our celebration and to get to know you. You have been and will continue to be in my daily prayers. Remember today and always that you are marked in love with the sign of the cross as Christ's forever, and nothing can ever change that.

And Rev. Peter – you really shouldn't have mentioned that this is 'Low Sunday' in your notes to me! Imagine – there are over 80 in the congregation today.

In the church world, as in the secular world, there are the 'haves' and the 'have nots'. The 'haves' have it all – they have a fabulous house of worship with all mod cons while still having those beautiful stained glass windows. They have ample parking and a paved lot. They have a great choir and music director; they have powerful preachers; they have a vital youth ministry and youth pastor who is paid to hang out with their young people; they have friendly and welcoming greeters and sidespeople; they have caring child ministry leaders and they have a pastor who is a great preacher, and he or she has a young family to encourage other young families. They have parishioners with a compassionate spirit. They have a balanced budget with funds to spare for their many outreach ministries. They have it all – good stuff, good people, good mission, and good money.

The have nots, on the other hand – well - they do not have all of that. They often have buildings that need a great deal of work to maintain. You would have trouble even spotting a young person in their pews or let alone finding anyone interested in youth ministry. They have a tired pastor whose sermons are dull and who have no people skills; these churches have red ink all over their budgets and they have no sense of vision. In their eyes they have no good stuff.

The church depicted in our Gospel passage from John is one of those 'have not' churches. Here, we get our first glimpse of the disciples gathered together after the resurrection, the first glimpse, in other words, of the church in its earliest days, and, all in all, it is not a very pretty picture.

The night before he died, Jesus had carefully prepared his disciples to be a devoted and confident fellowship of faith. They were to be a community of profound love with the gates wide open and the welcome mat always out, but here we find them on the other side of Easter barricaded in a house with the doors bolted shut.

They were to be the kind of people who stride boldly into the world to bear fruit in Jesus' name, a people full of the Holy Spirit performing even greater works than Jesus himself (John 14:12). Even though Mary has told the disciples that very morning that she has 'seen the risen Lord' (20:18) the disciples do not really live bold and empowered by that new reality, but rather we find them cowering in fear, hoping nobody will find out where they are before they get their alibis straight. In short, we see here the church at its worst -- scared, disheartened and defensive.

If this little sealed-off group of Christians were to place one of those cheery church ads in the Saturday newspaper, what could it possibly say? "The friendly church where all are welcome"?

Hardly, unless one counts locked doors as a sign of hospitality. "The church with a warm heart and a bold mission"?

Actually more like the church with sweaty palms and a timid spirit.

Indeed, John's gospel gives us a snapshot of a post Easter church with nothing – no plan, no promise, no program, no perky youth ministry, no powerful preaching, no parking lot, nothing. In fact, when all is said and done, this terrified little band huddled in the corner of a room with a chair braced against the door has nothing going for it.

That is, until the risen Christ appears on their doorstep.

And then with nothing Christ opens the bolted door of that nothing church. He offers them his wounded hands, and his breath, and he gives them his presence and his peace. Not once, but twice, because today's gospel happens over two Sundays. On his second appearance Jesus does not lecture them for hiding behind closed doors, even after they had received the gift of his Holy Spirit for the first time. He didn't chide Thomas for wanting to see and place his hands in his wounds. Jesus simply comes and gives of himself. And that seems to be the main point of this story and the Easter miracle in today's gospel. What those frozen disciples longed for most after the resurrection was Jesus' presence, and that is exactly what they got.

Jesus kept returning to them because although they were a church and a people who had nothing to offer anyone at that moment in time, he believed in who they were and in what they could become. To this cowering group of disciples Jesus comes and reveals himself, commissioning them to share in his ministry, and empowering them with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

If only they could trust in themselves and in the power of the Holy Spirit. They needed to take a leap of faith...

Soren Kierkegaard the Danish philosopher/theologian tells the story of a man trapped at the edge of a cliff with a raging fire burning towards him. It would only be a minute or two before the fire consumes him completely. Suddenly he hears a voice from down below in the cliff, calling, "Jump".

The man answers, "But I can't see you! There's only darkness down there! I'm afraid!" The voice from the deep answers, "Jump anyway, *I can see you!*"

What a word of hope for every 'have not' congregation, and every terrified Christian. In spite of our fears and doubts, Christ will return again and again and again to breathe his peace and forgiveness over us, urging us forward in ministry and empowering us with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Thank God those fearful first disciples took the leap of faith and became an Easter people and an Easter church. We know that is what happened because if it had not, we would not be here today listening to Luke's account in the Book of Acts of that early Christian community, who, "*With great power gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus.*" And being filled with the Holy Spirit they became what Jesus knew they had within them to become - a fellowship of believers, a church where those who belong are of 'one heart and one mind' and share a common purpose, mission and value.

They did it because they believed that Jesus was with them. And so with that in mind and with Easter in them, they gave themselves on behalf of the broken, bruised, and battered; they shared their lives with the least and the last. They had deep love for one another, tender compassion for their neighbors, and passionate devotion to God. Everywhere you looked, there were signs of the resurrection. The early church was a vivid demonstration of the living Christ.

It wasn't a perfect church. It was no less human and flawed than are our churches. Remember that among its leaders was a denying Peter, a competitive John, an ambitious James, and, yes, even a doubting Thomas. The same book of Acts that describes this church as a bold and shining witness to the resurrection is also honest to tell us that it was often embroiled in conflict and embittered by controversy. It sounds oh, so much like our churches today.

If that oh-so-human and imperfect bunch could rise with Jesus above its own pettiness to be an Easter church, then maybe we, too, sometimes in spite of ourselves, can manage to be transparent to the presence of the living Christ.

In our church, as in every church, we doubt ourselves and our ministries; we wish we had more good stuff, and even more good people to do God's good work.

But in so many ways as we gather together, break the bread, tell our stories, sing our songs, pray our prayers, bear witness to the good news, care for those in need, work for peace, and struggle for justice, we discover anew that Jesus is alive among us, that "great grace is upon us all."

When, like Thomas, I am tempted to doubt the Easter message, and when like the others I fail to be an Easter Christian I often call to mind your faces and your faithfulness in ministry.

When the students from the local high school and members of our church sit down together for a simple lunch in the Hall at St. Brice's, and when a quiet word of witness is spoken to someone searching for God, or struggling with their faith, and when we pray together and work together as a community of faith, I see signs of the resurrection and know that we are an Easter people.

When men or women, already tired from their week's work, stay up late at night to prepare a Sunday school lesson, or repair something in the church, or come early on Sunday to welcome those who will join us for worship, when children hear words of blessing and affirmation spoken to them by adults who did not have to care but chose to do so, when notes are written to the lonely and the fearful promising prayers and support, I see evidence that Easter has happened.

When people laugh and cry together over the joys and disappointments of their lives, when death is faced honestly and hopefully, when grace and mercy, not condemnation and harshness, govern our relationships, and when the church opens its heart and its doors to whoever comes yearning for the love of God, excluding no one, I am convinced that Jesus is alive.

I see it happen at St. Brice's and the wonder of it takes my breath away: Jesus embraces the world with the arms of his followers-our arms. He speaks words of grace with our voices. He demands justice and offers peace through our deeds of witness and compassion. Over and over again, by God's great grace, the simple and ordinary practices of the church are the means by which Jesus becomes real to us and to the world. They are the sights and sounds of Christ, present to us in his body, the church; they are evidence for the truth of Easter, signs of the resurrection, and ways to touch and trust Jesus.