

## **“The Easter Community”**

John 20:19-31

The big day is over, and it was, as usual, very nice. Gary's homing pigeons performed beautifully at the sunrise service and Midge managed once again to provide us not only with a warm reception on a cold morning, but also, somehow, another spectacular sunrise. Here at the service that we like to call the late service, the bell choir, directed by Sara, shined along with Andy on the trumpet. And Lori and our eighteen member choir outdid themselves. It was a great Easter Sunday!

Inevitably, though, Easter is followed by the Sunday after Easter. It happens every year. So here we are, pretty much back to the usual service and the usual attendees. The texts this morning are suitable for the Sunday after Easter. In the Gospel reading we hear about two post-Easter gatherings of the followers of Christ – one on Easter evening, and the other a week later. I have always thought that this text is most appropriate for this Sunday because at the first of these gatherings, we're told, someone was missing. It was Thomas. We don't know where he was – he just wasn't there.

The same is true for us as we gather on this second Sunday of Easter. Some of our number, some of those who were here last Sunday, are missing. They aren't here. We don't know where they are. They just aren't here. That is how it is. It is the Sunday after Easter. Things inevitably get back normal. It's just as well, really. We can't keep things going every Sunday at the pace we were at on Easter. None of us could handle it. And, to tell the truth, we Presbyterians probably feel a little more comfortable here anyway. On Easter there is just a little too much emotion, all that running and weeping, and angels showing up right and left. It sounds a little too Pentecostal for many of us. It makes Presbyterians uncomfortable.

This Sunday things begin to settle down a bit. People are coming together, getting organized, establishing some rules and procedures. In the reading from Acts, which takes place a little later on, they have elected leaders and have even taken an offering. Now we're getting somewhere! They don't have pledge cards yet or an every member canvass, no printed bulletin, no website, but they do have a treasurer apparently. And they have formed a mission committee to see to it that what has been collected is distributed to the needy. They are already engaged in mission, early in the book of Acts. And they are beginning to do things decently and in order! They may have started out as Pentecostals, but it wasn't very long before they turned into Presbyterians.

But it is the Gospel reading that I wanted to talk about this morning, with two different accounts of disciples gathering together, just as we do Sunday after Sunday. The first of these gatherings is on Easter evening, and it is not so much a gathering as it is a hiding out. The disciples are understandably frightened. The crucifixion did just what the Romans designed crucifixions to do, it terrified everyone who might have any reason to fear being noticed by the authorities. And as close friends and followers of Jesus, the disciples had plenty of reason for concern. So they have gathered behind closed and locked doors.

The first recorded Sunday evening service. I don't know if anyone else here grew up with the Sunday evening service. When I was growing up, we went to church not just every Sunday morning, but also every Sunday evening. The evening service was preceded by the Youth Fellowship. So basically we spent about four hours in church on Sunday if you count Sunday School and Youth Fellowship.

So the disciples gather on Easter evening, according to this writer, not to worship but to hide. But then, suddenly, Jesus shows up, and it turns into a worship service. Jesus greets them with the words that we use every Sunday in the passing of the peace: Peace be with you. Then he shows them his hands and his side. He gives them a charge, just as we do at the close of the service, saying to them, "As the father has sent me, so I send you." And he tells them that if they forgive the sins of anyone, they are forgiven. Something like the Confession and Pardon in our service.

And what I think we may have here is at least a partial description of what early Christian worship was like. The most important part of that worship was a sense of the presence of Christ. "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name," Jesus says, "there am I in the midst of them." I think part of what this Gospel writer is telling us is precisely that – that when we gather together, Christ is with us.

But then the writer gives a special twist to the story. Someone, he says, wasn't there! It was Thomas, one of the disciples. He was not present at this gathering on Easter evening. He didn't see Jesus. So the other disciples say to Thomas, "We have seen the Lord." And they are all excited and energized. They want Thomas to get with it, to get into the spirit of it.

This happens sometimes in churches today. A group of people go off to a conference and get all stirred up, which is a good thing. They get energized and turned on and want to bring the Spirit back with them and share it with everyone. But when they get back home and tell their fellow church members how exciting it all was and how they've got the Spirit, it often doesn't translate well.

So it was with Thomas and the other disciples. "We have seen the Lord," say the others, expecting Thomas to share their excitement. But Thomas says, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

This must have been a problem for many in the early church. In fact, Thomas in this story is probably representative of a number of those who could not accept the bodily resurrection of Christ. One possible interpretation of this passage in the Gospel of John is that the writer of the Gospel wanted to offer some guidance to his contemporaries regarding how to handle the situation. What do you do with those who say they cannot believe?

There are a couple of possible ways of dealing with dissent. One way is to forbid it! There are always those in every age who will insist on doctrinal purity. They will have a doctrinal statement that everyone must subscribe to, no exceptions. If you cannot answer in the affirmative as to belief in each of these statements, then you are not one of us. You do not belong.

There are any number of examples of this kind of doctrinal purity, but the one that I want to cite is the most interesting to me because it not only involves our denomination, the Presbyterian Church, but it also involves Auburn. In 1923 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, meeting in Indianapolis, passed a motion requiring the Presbytery of New York City to administer a doctrinal examination of the Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Fosdick was a liberal Baptist minister serving by special arrangement as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City. The year before, on a Sunday in May, Fosdick had preached what became his most famous sermon. It was entitled, *Shall the Fundamentalists Win*, and it set off a firestorm in our denomination.

The motion that passed at the General Assembly in Indianapolis the following year requiring a doctrinal examination would have required all Presbyterian ministers, in effect, to subscribe to five key doctrines. These were:

- the inerrancy of Scripture (meaning that there were no factual errors in the bible)
- the virgin birth of Jesus
- the substitutionary theory of the atonement
- the bodily or physical resurrection of Jesus
- the performance of the miracles of Christ

There would be a theological test for anyone who wanted to be a minister in the Presbyterian Church. All ministers would have to subscribe to these doctrines.

Where Auburn comes into the picture is in connection with the Auburn Seminary. James Hastings Nichols, professor of Church History at the seminary, with the help of his friend, Henry Sloane Coffin, who was the pastor at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, drafted a paper defending the right of ministers to have freedom of conscience with regard to these doctrines. This document came to be known as the Auburn Affirmation. It was signed initially by 150 pastors and elders and eventually by 1274 people. (And, by the way, the document was printed by Jacob's Press.)

The Presbytery of New York exonerated Fosdick and within two years the fundamentalists' position was defeated. Within five years, the General Assembly agreed that the unity of the Presbyterian Church is based not in uniformity, but in "the power of its faith to hold together diverse views and beliefs." For those with internet access, you can read more about the Auburn Affirmation on the church's website.

I have to confess that before I came to Auburn I had no knowledge of the Auburn Affirmation. But now that I know about it I am proud to be associated with it in any way, just as I am proud to be associated with the history of this church. What they were saying was that Christian unity did not depend upon subscribing to specific doctrinal statements. A special commission appointed to report back to the General Assembly said this: "Presbyterianism is a great body of belief, but it is more than a belief; it is also a tradition, a controlling sentiment. The ties which bind us to it are not of the mind only; they are ties of the heart as well." (*The Presbyterian Controversy*, p. 159)

This was a victory for freedom of conscience. And in my mind it very much coincides with the story in the Gospel of John regarding Thomas. The most encouraging part of that story comes right after Thomas makes his declaration of skepticism: "Unless I see his hands..." and so on, "I will not believe." Immediately following that, the writer tells us that the disciples were together again the following week, and Thomas was with them. You see? They had not said to Thomas, "Unless you accept the bodily resurrection of Jesus, you cannot be a part of us." He was there with them, still full of skepticism. And this time when Jesus appeared, Thomas saw him and he believed, and in fact, he offered the first real confession of faith by saying to Jesus, "My Lord and my God."

What we see here is the formation of the church, and in that formation they found room to accept people who came with doubts and even with skepticism and with unbelief. Their unity was found not in acceptance of doctrine but in their fellowship in Christ, in ties not of the mind only but also of the heart.