

April 8, 2018 – The Second Sunday of Easter
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John 20:19-31

What Was Easter Like?

Easter Sunday was tough. Climatological conditions were not optimal, what with that chill in the air, apprehension pervading the atmosphere. Not much joy. Not many people. How could people even get in, anyway? The doors were locked.

I'm speaking of the very first Easter, of course, which had a very different feel than Easter as usually observed. What a wonderful celebration we had here last week! Thank you for all you did to make it so. The atmosphere was not chilly, though the temperature was. And is. Last Sunday I was shaking my head at our weather here in Chicago, and then on Monday I flew up to Minnesota, which promptly got 8 inches of snow. This did not make me want to sing *Joy to the World*, our musical fun last week notwithstanding.

If we were trying to recreate conditions of the very first Easter, it would be warmer. Also, we would not have a church packed with people and lilies and music and streamers and children hopped up on an egg hunt. No, if we really wanted to mimic the biblical record of the first gathering of Jesus' followers after the resurrection, we would huddle together. Not because we were cold, but because we were afraid. We would be an anxious group, wondering what would become of us, worried that people outside were out to get us. Such is the picture the evangelist John paints of the very first Easter, as observed by Jesus' disciples. They gather together in the evening. (They hadn't yet decided to worship in the mornings.) They gather together in a locked room. (Not a great strategy for welcoming visitors.) They gathered together, as the text says, "for fear of the Jews." It is a phrase to stop and ponder, this "fear of the Jews." Why this fear? It was Rome, after all, who carried out Jesus' execution. Moreover, Jesus' disciples themselves were Jews. They were all Jews, the first disciples, as, of course, was Jesus. Who were they afraid of but their own kindred and kind? In the centuries that have followed, phrases like this—gross misreadings of them—have contributed to a long and heinous history, to maligning and much worse, the ongoing anguish that is Anti-Semitism, in which the church is implicated.

It is not an ennobling portrait, this first gathering of Jesus' followers on the very first Easter. Jesus has risen, but the news alone is not enough to undo primal urges for self-protection; not enough to pry loose reflexive grasping of anxiety; not enough to combat the all too common placement and focus of one's fear on an "other," a generalized and unexamined other category of people. That that category is self-inclusive somehow does not register.

It is not ennobling, nor is it ancient history. That all this still happens, that we are still prone to apprehensive self-protection, that we seek solace in hopeless groupthink, that we lock ourselves in for fear of what's out there, that we make what's out there our enemy, when what is out there is also what we are, that all this still happens makes me think that we do, after all, recreate conditions of the very first Easter much more accurately than first assumed.

Then, as now, hearing the news that Christ is risen is not enough. Even the most wondrous Easter Sunday morning worship, much as I love it, is not enough. A life made new by the gospel will require something more. It will require the presence of the wounded Christ and the gift and power of the Holy Spirit. If our predicament is laid out in the gospel, so also is this promise, our hope, how Easter continues. So also we need to read on to what happened later on, that first day of the week, and one week later, too.

As it happens, we hear this story one week later. In fact, this reading is appointed for the week after Easter, every year. And how critical it is that we do hear it, for we hear in it who

comes in despite our locked doors, the tombs we make for ourselves. In the gospel we hear who comes in, and what he gives, and what that does, what change that effects in individuals and in the group, immediately and over time, in measures large and small,

As we've noted, the disciples who gathered the first Easter did not get together to schedule greeters, and sign up for coffee hour, and select which banners to hang. They gathered together not knowing what to do. They were a dispirited, dwindling group. And then Jesus came among them, and showed them his hands, and his feet, and his side, Christ showed them his scars, signs of the scope of God's tangible, bodily love for us. And Jesus breathed into them the Holy Spirit. And things began to change in them. One of those changes is that these disciples moved from being passive hearers of resurrection news to active speakers of it; they started telling other people about what they had experienced. One of those people was named Thomas. Another change is that the disciples decided to get together again, why not make the same day, next week. At this next gathering, again the text tells us that the doors were shut, but it does not make a point about the doors being locked. Progress.

At this next gathering, as the disciples have begun to talk to others about Easter, the group has also gotten a little larger, Thomas is with them this time, at least in body. Mentally and emotionally Thomas is where the other disciples were a week before—or in an even worse place, Thomas is not just dispirited, he is all but done. But at this next gathering Thomas undergoes a change, a considerable change. Thomas goes from cynicism and ultimatum to the clearest Christological profession you will find in John's gospel.

It a remarkably story of Easter transformation, Thomas's is, but note, too, how it might not have happened but for a more subtle but no less remarkable change that takes place in the disciples as a whole. This change, in and to the group, is implicit in the story of Thomas, this change that is made possible, no doubt, by the infusion of the Spirit. More than a story of doubt, this story today is John's version of Pentecost—and it has same effect as the Pentecost story that we hear about in the book of Acts, that story of the gift of the Holy Spirit and the inclusion of people from all different places. This change in the disciples in today's story is this: after Easter Sunday evening, when the disciples tell Thomas about what they've seen, he is not particularly impressed. Thomas expresses his thoughts, how he is not on the same page as they are, in a very blunt way. Thomas does not see eye to eye with the other disciples, at all. One could, the disciples could, at that point, consider Thomas an "other." But they do not. The disciples are not afraid of him, and they do not lock him out. Instead they say, "Come to worship next week." They say, "It's okay if you are having a hard time believing. We've been there, too. Come and be here, with us." The disciples welcome someone different than them to be in community with them. They invite him to gather with them, to gather around hope—even though he is pretty far from hopeful, to all appearances is dead set against it.

And look what happens, and continues to happen, in Thomas, in the life of the church, in the book of Acts, as the disciples open up, are opened up, to the wideness of God's love in Christ, which is for Jews, and for Gentiles, too; which is for people whose faith is strong, and for people who have all but had it; which is for proclamation on Easter Sunday, and for continuation, for sharing and living, in community with people like and unlike you, every day after.

This is why we gather here. This is why we gather on Sundays for worship, because the wounded Christ is present here, at this table, and in the presence of your neighbor. This is why we gather here, because Christ's Spirit of power and possibility is moving in the peace we share and in the immeasurable and often all but invisible and always ongoing transformations that are happening in us and among us. This is why we gather here, with the doors unlocked. When the weather is nicer we will prop them open.