

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
Easter II: May 1, 2011

John 20:19-31

19 When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.'

Jesus and Thomas 24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, '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.' 26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' 27 Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' 28 Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' 29 Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah,* the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

It is great to be with you this morning for this countercultural moment. In our society, Christmas begins in late September and ends at the stroke of midnight on December 25th as trees are dragged to the curb in the middle of the night.

Easter, by the same token, typically lasts one day, though perhaps the season can be stretched a day or two, until all the candy has been eaten.

Counter to the prevailing culture, the tradition of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church of which we are a part, Christmas begins on December 25 and lasts 12 days. And of course, Easter, which as we all know is the heart of the year, lasts a full fifty days...culminating with the Feast of Pentecost.

I have to say, the Church has got it right. The more I let the church year form me...as opposed to taking all my cues from the prevailing culture of materialism which is constantly moving on to the next thing that I must buy...the more I let my days be formed by the Church year, and more importantly, by the proclamation of the gospel that this tradition affords, the better I am for it... even if I find myself out of step with almost everyone.

And so it is, in the great tradition of the Church, we gather today, on the Second Sunday of Easter, 8 days into the great fifty days...and so it is... that we meet once again, St. Thomas...doubting

Thomas. This is part of the wisdom of the church year...on the Second Sunday of Easter we address doubt.

Thomas is a favorite of Episcopalians. "Unless I see for myself" he says, "I will not believe." We love his chutzpah. We appreciate his questions, his determination, his unwillingness to just, "go with the flow." We are not dogmatic or coercive people. You do not have to check your questions or your brain at the door when you come into an Episcopal Church. All of these things are very good indeed. I suspect, it is this openness that has brought many of us here.

But...for all that is positive in our approach to Thomas, and with our openness...we do tend to forget the end of the story...when Thomas says, "My Lord and my God." We tend to forget that Jesus says, "Blessed are the people who have not seen and yet have believed." Questions are good, but belief brings blessings from our Lord himself.

It may be that answering a question, coming to a conclusion makes us nervous because we like to keep our options open. At the same time, sometimes I think we confuse openness with having no opinions, no core beliefs.

But of course, we do have core beliefs, we know this, even if we articulate it poorly. We have reached some conclusions. We do have answers.

Each week as we gather for worship, and particularly in the Holy Eucharist, what we believe is brilliantly portrayed. We have the Scripture of Old and New Testaments, which tell us the story of salvation. We have the Creeds, as expressions of faith. We have the beautiful Eucharistic prayers, which summarize the story of God's good news for his creation and point the way forward.

Why are we so shy about sharing this? Why does it make us so uneasy? I mean, we have no trouble talking to folks about a great book we've read, a movie we've seen, a vacation we've taken, a restaurant we love. We'll share stock tips and talk endlessly and enthusiastically about sports teams...but we all of the sudden clam up when asked to talk about God.

Now, I think part of the reason we have difficulty sharing our faith –being evangelists if you will (there...I've said the word. The roof has not fallen in!), is because there is so much bad evangelism out there, especially in the American Southland. The very idea is associated in our minds with ham fisted, arrogant and at times belligerent approaches. So, we think, "If that is what it means to talk about the faith, count me out."

For instance, just this week a noted evangelist, Franklin Graham was in the news. He was asked if he thought President Obama is a Christian. Mr. Graham responded that he didn't know. In the context of his answer he said, "Hell is real and lasts forever." To avoid hell, a person has to accept Jesus in the heart. Graham has no idea if President Obama has done that because he can't see into

other people's hearts. By this logic, no one can ever be sure if anyone else, is a Christian. It must be mighty lonely. It certainly undermines the concept of Christian community.

I am sure the Rev. Mr. Graham has done many good things and I would be the first to say that the Rev. Mr. Graham is entitled to his opinion. But I would also point up that his opinion about what makes a Christian, is contrary to the doctrine, discipline and worship of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church...of which we are a part.

In that tradition, that 2000 year old tradition, Christians are made in the waters of baptism. There is an objective reality to baptism...an outward and visible sign. There is an inward grace, of course...but that grace is given by God, not produced by us. So, if someone asks, "Is so and so a Christian?" we can answer firmly and happily, "They are if they've been baptized." For the record, President Obama was baptized in the early 1990s.

This morning it is our privilege to baptize Lucy. She comes here this morning as a wonderful and gifted person. She has great parents and a great family. She will leave here with that...but also with something much greater. Baptism is a sacrament, through which God's grace works. And so, Lucy, from this day forward, is a Christian, she has been claimed by God as a disciple of Christ.

Of course, her response is important. God has work for her to do. God has uniquely gifted her to be part of His love and redemption. That is why Lucy's parents, today, make a public promise to raise her in the context of Christian community. They bring her to church not just today, but pledge to raise her, week by week, Sunday by Sunday, in Christian worship and community, so that she may grow as God intends.

Now, there will be some days, Mom and Dad, long about when Lucy turns 13 I suspect, that you may wonder if anything really happened today. Be assured, something real does happen, is happening, will continue to happen. We emerge from the waters of baptism as Christians...we can be good ones or not...but that gift of God is never in doubt.

Baptism enlists us in God's service, through Jesus Christ, in the power of the Spirit. True evangelism, in my opinion, celebrates this grace freely given and encourages others to embrace it. We make no claims to know the ultimate disposition of anyone, we simply offer the invitation...an invitation that is focused not on the "fires of hell" but on this life, and on God's love and work of redemption right now. And let us never forget that God is full of surprises and God is never limited by what we do or don't do. Our call is simply to share the love that we know through Christ Jesus with others.

Rob Bell, who is a pastor of a church in Michigan and comes out of the conservative, evangelical tradition, same as Mr. Graham, has written a book, entitled, "Love Wins." You might have heard

about it. It has gotten him on the cover of Time magazine a couple of weeks ago and angered a number of folks. But he is right on target.

For instance, Bell wonders, how can people talk about how loving God is on the one hand and then turn around and say that because a person dies without having said the right prayer or formula, either in the heart or elsewhere, or without having the proper ritual performed... that this loving God will boil them in a vat of oil for all eternity. You see the contradiction! God is either loving or he delights in boiling people for ever...you can't have both.

We believe in a God of love. This is the good news... that God is love. That is the answer. And we believe that God's love has been fully expressed in Christ Jesus. And true evangelism shares that message.

It is interesting, Bell also notes, "The writers of scripture consistently affirm that (human beings) all part of the same family. What we have in common- regardless of our tribe, language, customs, beliefs or religion- outweighs our differences. This is why God (as scripture says in I Timothy 2:4) wants 'all people to be saved.'" (Page 99 of "Love Wins"). God wants all people to be saved. To embrace his love, in this age and in the age to come. Does God not get what God wants? No...I think God will get what he wants. God can handle the future.

And so, we can focus on now. And the basic question for us comes down to, "How do we want to live our lives?" Right now. Right here. By what light?

As Christians we believe that Jesus is the one who shows the way...he shows us how to live the good life...NOW. We believe that in Jesus, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. If we want to know who God is, we look to Jesus...to the man of peace who died a painful death on a cross. We look to the one whose way was vindicated when God raised him up from the grave. We believe, that in the power of the Spirit, this Jesus is alive and let loose in this world. We pledge our lives to it. True evangelism invites others to join. Faithful to our Lord, we must share the story of love and hope...with enthusiasm. We share it because we know that love wins.

And yes, we do love doubting Thomas. We do honor the questions, and we should always take people where they are. We must never forget "...Jesus responds to almost every question he's asked...with a question..." (page x of "Love Wins" by Rob Bell.)

But we also live the answers, day by day by day to the best of our abilities. And faith is more than just the questions. Faith also means being able to say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God". Amen.