

Sunday, April 11, 2021

Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

Prayer of the Day

Almighty God, with joy we celebrate the day of our Lord's resurrection. By the grace of Christ among us, enable us to show the power of the resurrection in all that we say and do, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

First Reading: Acts 4:32-35

While the apostles testified to others about the resurrection of Jesus, the early Christian community shared what they owned or sold their possessions to help their fellow believers who were in need.

³²Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. ³³With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. ³⁴There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. ³⁵They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

Psalm: Psalm 133

How good and pleasant it is to live together in unity. (Ps. 133:1)

¹How good and how pleasant it is,
when kindred live together in unity!

²**It is like fine oil upon the head, flowing down upon the beard,
upon the beard of Aaron, flowing down upon the collar of his robe. R**

³It is like the dew of Hermon flowing down upon the hills of Zion.
For there the LORD has commanded the blessing: life forevermore. **R**

Second Reading: 1 John 1:1--2:2

The opening of this letter serves as a reality check. The reality of God is light, but our confessed reality has been sin. God cleanses us from our sinful reality through Christ's death so that we live in fellowship with Christ and walk in God's light.

¹We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—²this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—³we

declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

⁵This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. ⁶If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; ⁷but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

^{2:1}My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; ²and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

Gospel: John 20:19-31

The story of Easter continues as the risen Jesus appears to his disciples. His words to Thomas offer a blessing to all who entrust themselves in faith to the risen Lord.

¹⁹When 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." ²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. ²¹Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." ²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So 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."

²⁶A 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." ²⁷Then 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." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But 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.

Gospel

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.
Amen

I have to begin today with an admission: I have a difficult time preparing a sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter. It is not because I am sermoned out from Holy Week and Easter. It is not because there are not great texts for today. In fact, that is my problem. The texts presented to us today are incredible texts. Each and every one of them. From each lesson including the psalm there are innumerable sermons to be preached. Therein lies my dilemma each year.

So this year I have challenged myself to make use of all these wonderful texts in one sermon. No, don't worry, it won't be an unusually long sermon. At least I'm not planning on it being. We'll all see.

Each of our texts today describe differing paths or ideas of just how resurrection breathes new life into individuals and communities.

Our reading from Psalm 133 and 1 John are readily connected. They describe communities that draw their life from God. Psalm 133 celebrates the "good and pleasant" quality of living in unity. In Acts 4, the "great power" made visible as "testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus" and the "great grace that was upon them all" finds embodiment in their life within the community: "not a needy person among them." Property owners selling homes, with proceeds "distributed to each as any had need."

Acts' very idealistic description remains an aspiration for all Christians as it connects with scripture's emphasis on justice for the poor. We also find an emphasis on generosity and caring in 1 John.

The fellowship referred to here in the Greek – *koinonia* – does not mean potluck suppers in the fellowship hall. Rather, it draws from the giving nature of God and Jesus Christ, calling each of us "to walk in the light as God is the light." And the resulting "fellowship with one another" means living in the same resurrection power described in Acts, with love literally flowing from understanding how to "do what is true," faithfully responding to a question that is front and center – How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help?

Our gospel text today explores three other elements of Christian community: peace, the gift of the Spirit, and life in Christ's name.

First, peace in Christian communities is threefold:

- In the face of fear, peace from knowing Christ's presence,
- When sent out to an uncertain calling, peace from trusting the one who sends,
- And in the midst of doubts, peace from experiencing Christ's love.

Thomas' ultimate expression of faith – My Lord and my God - ties together our gospel's beginning with its resurrection empowered future.

Second, the gift of the Spirit in John's gospel finds expression in how we use our power in relationships with each other, and particularly the power to forgive or retain sins. We can best interpret that power in light of John 3:16 and 17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

And third, all of today's texts can really be summed up by noting that John doesn't just aim at belief but rather at believing. We find that belief is really what "we are ready to act upon," which is a recurring theme today.

I truly believe that it is easy for us to see from these great texts before us today that the answer to the question – Does the resurrection make a difference in our lives? – is a resounding "Yes!"

And I truly believe in many ways you and I are like the disciples on that first Easter night in that we may think that we have good reason to be afraid. We all know that our world is changing around us at an ever-increasing pace. No one is immune from suffering, and too often it feels as though hatred is winning out over compassion and kindness.

Today's news headlines can easily persuade us that death does indeed have the final word, which compiles us to lock ourselves away from this threatening world and turn inward in order to save ourselves.

But resurrection reality acknowledges our fear but refuses to leave us locked in it. Instead, the resurrected Jesus gives us his peace. This peace is an unconditional gift, not at all dependent on our ability to demonstrate trust, or hope, or anything else. The peace of the risen Christ is wounded-but-still-loving peace, smack-dab-in-the-midst-of-fear peace, peace that makes it possible to breathe, to forgive, to receive the Holy Spirit – even when we're afraid.

Resurrection victory over sin and death does not remove the scars of suffering – not for Jesus and not for us. The disciples rejoice at Jesus' presence only after they show him his wounds. This is not some glorified ghost of the one they knew and loved. No indeed. This is their beloved Jesus – put to death, but alive, wounded, but whole, bearing the mark of the cross, the mark of divine love for the beautiful, brutal world. What, then, does it mean for us to serve a scarred Savior, to be loved by a suffering God?

As Jesus has been sent to embody God's love for the world, now Jesus sends his disciples. The work he began, they will continue – healing, forgiving, speaking to power, working for reconciliation, feeding, freeing, loving. How will they do this work to which they've been called? How will we live as Easter people? The breath of Jesus, the Holy Spirit, rests with us.

John's gospel ends with a clear purpose for the book itself: "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."

In one very real sense Jesus' words "Peace be with you" creates what it declares – God's peace – instilling peace within us even when we are most afraid. Death is not the end of the story. Life with God is our journey's end. This is the resurrection reality we proclaim to the world. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Each of us stands in the midst of an uncertain now and future. We have every reason to be scared, to be afraid. One reality for us and for all congregations is the unknown fallout to our worshipping community as the pandemic slowly ends. We don't know what the final shape of our congregation will be. It is likely to be altered in one way or another. Yet together there really is nothing that together we cannot confront, plan and act on in ways that make us a strong, positive, force for good in our community.

It appears that one way we can rise to the occasion is for all of us to be on the same page as we march into the future. Each of us needs to reevaluate our willingness to give of what God has first given us as we together come to understand what it means for us to be a worshipping community right where we are – and have been for many, many years.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

The prayers are prepared locally for each occasion. The following examples may be adapted or used as appropriate.

Alive in the risen Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we bring our prayers before God who promises to hear us and answer in steadfast love.

A brief silence.

You shower your church with grace, O God. Unite the whole church on earth, so that with one heart it testifies to the resurrection of Jesus Christ with power and love. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You proclaim the blessing of life forevermore. Like dew upon the mountains, refresh your creation. Restore waters, cleanse the air, and provide revitalizing moisture to parched land. Give your whole creation the promise of new life. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You direct the nations, O God. Guide all in authority, that they shepherd their peoples in the ways of your love. Defeat in us our impulse to war. Bestow the peace of Christ upon those in authority and breathe upon them the Holy Spirit. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You place within the heart of the church a spirit of sharing. Give us the power of your generous Spirit, that we provide for the needs of others (*specific needs may be named*). Announce your peace to those who are lonely, hurting, suffering, or afraid. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

You give us fellowship with one another in this faith community (*name*). Shine the light of the risen Christ in our life together, so that we live in love for one another and our joy may be complete. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

Here other intercessions may be offered.

You share the gift of eternal life. In thanksgiving and remembrance, we recall the lives and gifts of those who now live in endless joy (*especially*). Unite us with them in resurrection hope. Hear us, O God.

Your mercy is great.

In the hope of new life in Christ, we raise our prayers to you, trusting in your never-ending goodness and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.