

“He Showed Them”

Ps. 133

John 20:19-31

1 John 1:1-2:2

Acts 4:32-35

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Welcome to the Second Sunday of Easter. Welcome to Low Sunday. These days we think that phrase refers to attendance. We had 230 people here last Sunday, and today we have ... we don't have 230. Everyone is tired from the deprivation of Lent and the emotional roller coaster of Maundy Thursday to Easter, and we have been assured again that our Savior is raised, so some have retired to ponder that mystery until sometime around Christmas. Actually, the original meaning of Low Sunday is that of the eight feast days in the Octave of Easter celebration, which contains two Sundays, Easter is the higher in importance, and this Sunday the lower.

On Easter we have glorious triumphant music, and great hallelujahs. Jesus is raised from the dead. How do you do an encore to that? It is especially difficult considering we have had to do that for about 2,000 years. Things can get pretty mechanical – hitting the same stone wall. He is not back yet. I keep thinking maybe there is a reason he is not back yet. Yes, we are a called people; yes we are an elected people, but maybe we missed something, maybe there is something we were supposed to do, and it's not done yet. Paul Tillich says, “Year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage.”

Today's lectionary readings abound in sensations. In Psalms we have friendship like the anointing with oil, warm and rich, pungent with perfumes; the gasps of wonder at extravagant generosity in Acts; fear that is almost visible among the cowering disciples in John, the stigmata on Jesus body, visible and yes, Thomas, touchable if you want, and the empowering breath of Jesus; and in 1st John, the writer says, We saw with our eyes, we touched it with our hands, this revealed life. We are telling you what we saw and heard and experienced, so that you can share this with us.

What we really have here in the 1st John reading is a counterargument to those early churches who were aligned with the Gospel of John, and who perhaps were going beyond John's intent. Those folks may have thought that once you accepted Christ, you were in, and it did not matter how you acted.

Here in 1st John we are told that you cannot walk in the light if you are acting in the darkness.

Well, let's shine the light on another theme that's running through today's readings, because the way we stay in the light is through community. Psalm 133 tells us, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" And Acts shows us the sense of camaraderie and the mutual support among the early church. If we look through Paul's letters, though, we find that maybe all was not sweetness and light. There are quibbles about circumcision, about eating meat offered to idols, about being followers of this church leader or that church leader instead of being a follower of Jesus. But the community was there and grew and as fragmented as we are, the community is here today. Praise God for that!

Maybe Luke is being optimistic in Acts, because things got off to a very tough start. This may be seen when we look back at the story of Thomas reported in John. There are some very powerful forces at work here. Now, even though those women had come to the disciples with some crazy story about the Master's body being gone, still they huddled in fear – in fear of the Jews who viewed them as outcasts, in fear of the Romans who viewed them as traitors, even in fear of Jesus for what they had not done. Talk about your sins of omission! They, his disciples, had deserted him.

Oh, and let us note, at least in passing... Who came back with news? The women! And who was at the cross watching Jesus die? The women! Oh, yes, John was there, too. Perhaps that is why Jesus loved him so much. But these other men are cowering behind locked doors. And then Jesus was among them, just like that, speaking to all of their fears: "Peace be with you." He showed them that he was not disappointed with their behavior. He showed them that he could still calm their fears. He showed them the wounds in his palms and side, so they would know it was truly him. Now these ten were just as doubtful as Thomas, but Jesus knew the doubt and fear in their minds and hearts and spoke to it immediately. And he knew this cowering and confused group was not about to be spokesmen for the kingdom of God.

So he created a Pentacost here, only this one is quiet and Spirit-filled, not echoing with the confusion of multiple tongues by multiple voices, with flames dancing. No, Jesus breathes on them the Holy Spirit. Peace to you. Christ is that peace, and in breathing the Spirit on them and us, we are filled with the peace that passes all understanding.

Maybe that story gives us a clue as to why some people don't come back to church after the glorious Easter celebration. Where is Christ now? Last

week his resurrection turned the world upside down; now you can hear only the relative quiet of society's careless noises. Where the feet of the rejoicing crowd stood last week, we see a few scattered empty water bottles and some gum wrappers. We do not see the world filled with that glory now – we see a scary economy that did not leave, our sons and daughters are still on the fronts of two wars; the doubts and fears are creeping back, the broken relationships, the disease and death, because this is our reality. We are visual people and our eyes convince us. Do we know by faith or by sight? Sight is so convincing.

In a wonderful book of essays titled *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, the late rabbi Abraham Heschel discusses our situation:

“We of this generation are afflicted with a severe case of dulling or loss of vision. Is it the result of our own intoxication, or is it the result of God's deliberate concealment of visible lights?”

“The spiritual memory of many people is empty, words are diluted, incentives are drained, inspiration is exhausted. Is God to be blamed for all this? Is it not man who has driven Him out of our hearts and minds? Has not our system of religious education been an abysmal failure?”

A recent Barna report shows 91% of young adults (age 19 to 36) identify Christians by what they hate.

Listen to Heschel, “The spiritual blackout is increasing daily. Opportunism prevails, callousness expands, the sense of the holy is melting away. We no longer know how to resist the vulgar, how to say no in the sense of a higher yes. Our roots are in a state of decay. We have lost the sense of the holy.”

Marva Dawn, theologian, author and educator, in *Reaching Out Without Dumbing Down*, gives page after page of examples of this loss of the sense of the holy. I chose one example from her discussion of the God of Efficiency. The church, in seeking to minister to people formed by the technological environment, easily succumbs to the principal criterion of efficiency.

“When this technological mind-set invades the church, it can be extremely destructive of true worship in multiple ways – especially if we ‘must’ finish the worship service in an hour there is no time for silence or the surprising workings of the Holy Spirit.” Her second point is “the bombardment of hyped media impressions creates the need for worship to be similarly ‘upbeat.’” Third, she speaks of a pressing and destructive need for efficiency in fellowship time. We do not understand each other as if we

belonged to each other – we do not really want to hear the answer to, “How are you?” The greatest loss Dr. Dawn mourns is the loss of the Sabbath. What happens to the rhythm of life when we lose that day dedicated to worship, to relationship, and to growing in the sense of who God is? I have omitted much of her discussion, and she is just getting started, but there is a brief example of the holy melting away. I would recommend to you both this book and *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly*.

This is an age of spiritual blackout, a blackout of God. We have entered not only the dark night of the soul, but also the dark night of society. We need to find ways of preserving the strong and deep truth of a living God theology (and a risen Savior) in the midst of this blackout.

Still, Heschel is hopeful, “for the darkness is neither final nor complete. Our power is first in waiting for the end of darkness, for the defeat of evil; and our power is also in coming upon single sparks and occasional rays, upon moments full of God’s grace and radiance.”

Listen to what Jesus showed us. Maybe we still do not get what Thomas got when he saw Jesus. Maybe he did not just see the risen body of our Lord, but as Fredrick Buechner says, “He saw the truth of Jesus and the truth of who Jesus was for him.” Thomas saw Jesus with his heart.

“To see him with the heart is to know that in the long run, his kind of life is the only life worth living.

“To see him with the heart is not only to believe in him but little by little to become bearers to each other of his healing life until we finally become healed and whole and alive within ourselves.

“To see him with the heart is to take heart, to grow true hearts, brave hearts at last (Buechner).”

We are called to be those sparks and rays. We are called to bring together the sparks of Christ’s healing life. We are to walk in the light, full of God’s grace and radiance. Sometimes we succeed. This is how we Christians “preserve those single moments of radiance and keep them alive in our lives, to defy absurdity and despair, and to wait for God to say again: Let there be light.

And there will be light (Heschel).”