

*The Lessons Appointed for Use on the*

## **Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**Year C**

**RCL**



Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

### The Collect

O God, you have prepared for those who love you such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards you, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

## **Acts 16:9-15**

During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city for some days. On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us;

she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. When she and her household were baptized, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come and stay at my home.” And she prevailed upon us.

## Psalm 67 Page 675, BCP

### *Deus misereatur*

- 1 May God be merciful to us and bless us,  
show us the light of his countenance and come to us.
- 2 Let your ways be known upon earth,  
your saving health among all nations.
- 3 Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.
- 4 Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,  
for you judge the peoples with equity  
and guide all the nations upon earth.
- 5 Let the peoples praise you, O God;  
let all the peoples praise you.
- 6 The earth has brought forth her increase;  
may God, our own God, give us his blessing.
- 7 May God give us his blessing,  
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of him.

**John 14:23-29**

Jesus said to Judas (not Iscariot), “Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.

“I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I am coming to you.’ If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Fa-

ther, because the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you this before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe.”

## SERMON

We have four impressive accounts of the life of Jesus and the letters of Paul upon which to base our understanding of the story we exist to tell. Unfortunately, they were all written to people who lived in a time so remote from us that it is hard to overstate the degree of separation. We live in a culture in which the following conversation makes perfect sense:

Do you care to drive me downtown?

No, I don't care to do that. Do you don't care to ride in the trunk?

No, I don't care to do that!

What just happened? I humbly suggest that this conversation would be enormously challenging for someone not calling this part of the country home. In Brazil you take your life in your own hands if you make the OK sign to signal that your dinner met with your approval. The locals would think you just flipped them

off.

The Gospels and the letters of Paul were written to people of radically different understanding and cultural assumptions than you hold. We're at great pains to make the Gospels relevant to our time, and we've often done it by allowing the tides of time to wash away those differences so that we can pretend they don't exist. The tides of time also have erased the reality of the challenges faced by those first Christians, leading us to think of a young church patterned more on our own experience than upon theirs.

Suppose you could somehow find yourself in First Century Palestine, attached to the followers of The Way, worshipers of the Risen Christ, and suppose you could speak Greek. What sorts of things would you find if you were invited to a seminar on evangelistic outreach? Perhaps something like this:

I'm very happy to welcome each of you to today's seminar on spreading the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. You are to be congratulated on your willingness to undertake this challenging mission. I'm sure you are all aware of just how difficult this will be, so let's get right to it.

First things first. What sort of obstacles will you encounter? I don't think you can be a successful advocate for the Good News if you go into it with your eyes blindfolded. We have to be realistic, so let's get to know the opposition. The first challenge you will face in the mission field is that people don't like to change, and they don't like to change their ideas about religion most of all. Professor Knowitallicus at the University of Antioch tells us that religious beliefs are the most conservatively held of beliefs. We saw just how challenging it can be to tell a Roman citizen that the gods he has worshiped all his lives are imaginary when that unfortunate fight broke out that eventually cost the University of Antioch its accreditation and left Professor Knowitallicus with that oddly shaped

nose. Your mission might well take you into dangerous waters. People do not like to be told things like that.

The second challenge you will face touches on the resurrection itself. As you know, there is a current rumor that Nero (patooee) has returned from the dead. Of course this is nonsense but it's currency makes it very difficult to get across our most powerful argument. How can we convince people that Jesus was raised from the dead if we get answered with an assertion that Nero did the same?

Perhaps the most difficult objection you will meet is that our God is the God of a subject people living in the wilderness of Judea. "If your god is so powerful", you will hear, "how come Rome is still Rome and your leader is dead?"

I don't want to understate these difficulties. They are real and powerful. Our goal this weekend will be to give you equally powerful arguments to counter these areas of resistance. We'll now take a short bathroom break and meet back here in ten minutes.

Pretend you don't know what follows over the next two millennia. How many here think our seminar presenter is going to be successful in teaching the attendees how to marshal arguments sufficiently powerful to make believers out of his listeners? Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? It's preposterous! By any rational measure, this seminar is going nowhere. I won't say that it's impossible for you to convince a non-believer of the reality of God or the historicity of the Risen Christ by your powerful arguments. I'm just saying I have never done so, and I went to Law School to learn how to be argumentative.

Our common sense expectation of the future prospects of a small group of dissident Jews whose leader has been killed are, of necessity, pretty glum. The story that Paul and the other disciples carry into the Roman empire, and even, in Paul's case, into Europe, is

pretty far-fetched. Add to that the realization that periodically through history carrying such a message could get you killed in spectacular fashion, and you have to be left with the feeling that for this to have happened there must be something faulty in our common sense understanding because it did happen, common sense not to the contrary.

You can convince someone to join the Rotary Club because it's a good way to make business connections. Convincing someone to be a believer can easily be done by pointing out the benefits of belonging to the person to whom you are speaking. One becomes a believer in order to get something one seeks, business contacts, society, community, whatever.

You can convince someone to belong to the Boy Scouts or the Girl Scouts because they teach young people how to behave decently, and that's good for every-

one. Arguments can easily convince people to be believers because we all have a stake in living in a society of shared fundamental values, a society in which people treat each other decently, and there is a perceived sense of safety.

But making believers is something that you are not going to accomplish by your personal effort. Believers, behavers, and belongers are each entirely different kettles of fish. Belongers and behavers act to get something of value, a benefit. Believers very often give up something of value – the myth of their autonomy. Their wealth. Sometimes their very lives.

So we're faced with a paradox, aren't we? Rome, the enemy of the believers, is now the home of the Vatican. The pagan beliefs of generations of Romans are of interest only to antiquarians and preteens that get hold of a copy of Bullfinch's Mythology, but to get from

there to here the only available resource was people, and we've already decided that people cannot make believers by their own personal effort.

How did this happen?

The tides of time have erased the enormous gulf that existed between the pagan beliefs of the Romans and the Greeks and the faith of the Jews. If you spent any time with Bullfinch's Mythology when you were young, you will remember that the stories of the gods involved themselves with explaining natural phenomena (lightning bolts are Zeus' weapons. The spring flowering comes because Proserpina has emerged from her time with her husband, Hades, in the underworld), and avoiding the negative effects of those natural phenomena by following the rituals prescribed. By the time of Jesus, the various cults were also associated with various guilds so the temples were good places to do

business. In other words, the temples of the gods were good places for both belongers and behavers.

The one idea that the faith of the Jews and the new movement called “The Way” offered that was utterly unknown to the pagan temples was that of relationship. You might buy off Demeter to get a good harvest, but there was no idea of a relationship between the worshiper and the god beyond the status of belonger and behaver. For the Jews and the followers of The Way, it was all about relationship, and that requires a believer.

Now we can answer that nagging suspicion that there is something missing in our understanding which led to the paradox we spoke of – if God has to rely on people to spread the good news, and if we cannot make believers by our own personal effort, how come the whole thing didn’t collapse two-thousand years ago?

The answer is in that concept of relationship.

“Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.”

Jesus then promised His disciples that He would send an advocate to advise them after his Ascension. We sometimes understand this as the Holy Spirit. We might better understand it as God’s indwelling within us, making a home with those who love His word, entering into relationship with us.

I have relationships with lots of people and lots of things. Jesus is not speaking of those sorts of relationships when he says, “...we will come to them and make our home with them”. The relationship about which Jesus speaks is a different sort of relationship. It is the engine which made the astonishing survival of the people committed to The Way possible. The Angel who called Paul to Macedonia reflected the Spirit’s presence in his-

tory. Paul's willingness to undertake a trip all the way to Europe (for Macedonia is in Europe) reflected the Spirit's presence within him. God's presence in Lydia responded to Paul's message. The story of the survival of The Way is the story of God calling to Himself where he dwells within those called to respond. Those called to respond have the courage to act for they are the believers.

The church will always have a blend of belongers, behavers and believers. There will be those who attend because they like the people and the society and feel blessed to belong to a church as welcoming as this one. There will be the behavers who join because they believe that the church will help discipline their lives, and help them raise children who will lead decent lives as well. But it is the believers, those with the courage to leap into the unknown sustained by the voice of God

calling out to them and to Creation who will move the Gospel into new lands.

AMEN

*Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.*

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