

**The Lessons Appointed for Use on
the
Second Sunday of EASTER**



Year A
RCL

Acts 2:14a,22-32
Psalm 16
John 20:19-31

The Collect

The Collect

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

Acts 2:14a,22-32

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd, “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power. For David says concerning him,

‘I saw the Lord always before me,
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;
therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;
moreover my flesh will live in hope.
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One experience corruption.

You have made known to me the ways of life;
you will make me full of gladness with your presence.’

“Fellow Israelites, I may say to you confidently of our ancestor David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Since he was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,

‘He was not abandoned to Hades,
nor did his flesh experience corruption.’

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Psalm 16

Conserva me, Domine

- 1 protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you; *
I have said to the LORD, “You are my Lord,
my good above all other.”
- 2 All my delight is upon the godly that are in the land, *
upon those who are noble among the people.
- 3 But those who run after other gods *
shall have their troubles multiplied.
- 4 Their libations of blood I will not offer, *
nor take the names of their gods upon my lips.
- 5 O LORD, you are my portion and my cup; *
it is you who uphold my lot.
- 6 My boundaries enclose a pleasant land; *
indeed, I have a goodly heritage.
- 7 I will bless the LORD who gives me counsel; *
my heart teaches me, night after night.
- 8 I have set the LORD always before me; *
because he is at my right hand I shall not fall.
- 9 My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; *
my body also shall rest in hope.
- 10 For you will not abandon me to the grave, *

nor let your holy one see the Pit.

11 You will show me the path of life; *
in your presence there is fullness of joy,
and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.

John 20:19-31

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

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

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.” 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.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” 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.”

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

SERMON

Breaking news. We go now to Galilee, Northern Israel, where there are wide-spread reports of disturbances in the streets.

Outbreaks of disorder have been reported in several areas of northern Israel, in the vicinity of Galilee. Followers of a certain teacher from the area, who was crucified by the Romans for inciting panic and questioning the authority of the Roman peace-keeping forces, maintain that their teacher has returned from the grave. Opposing forces have confronted members of the sect leading to disturbances throughout Galilee and nearby areas. It is feared that the Roman security forces will be compelled to respond, leading to further disorder. CNN, Galilee, Northern Israel.

This Sunday, I want us to focus on the contrast between our modern experience of the Easter story and the manner in which the people who lived through it ex-

perienced it. For people of the 1st Century, all was confusion and uncertainty. For modern people, the Resurrection is all but obscured behind well-loved traditions involving bunnies and springtime with a tip of the hat to the Resurrection of our Lord only among the ever-shrinking number of attendees at churches. Modern societies, certainly with exceptions, have left behind the uncomfortable confusion and uncertainty felt by the 1st Century witnesses and made of Easter a more secular holiday – a celebration of the coming of spring. I saw a picture on Facebook this week of the Pillsbury Dough Boy along with the caption, “He is Risen”. It was a joke. Ha ha. That’s our culture. For 1st Century people, the enormity of the reports from Galilee were swamp- ing their reason. They knew just as well as we do that dead people don’t return from the grave, but the evi- dence was right in front of their own eyes and they did-

n't know what to think about that. When I say confusion and uncertainty, I'm understating it. They were just as baffled as would we be if Abraham Lincoln suddenly appeared on Winchester Avenue.

Our problem is that we think of the Pascal mystery as too holy to think about critically, so we don't. We no longer engage our selves, our reason and our common sense when thinking about Easter but just accept it without examining it closely. We are too soon smart and, sadly, too late wise for unless we reconnect emotionally with the enormity of Jesus' resurrection, there's no point in celebrating Easter at all. Church, we're talking about a very publicly dead man appearing in the streets not only to His Disciples but to perhaps 500 people at one time¹.

¹ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. 1 Corinthians 15:3-6

Reason with me a minute. In 1st Century Israel, there was no shortage of street preachers and would-be prophets. Reason teaches us that in that confusion of voices, Jesus' voice would never have been heard at all during his lifetime, yet it was heard. Then, a frankly outlandish claim of resurrection, which should have been immediately dismissed as the raving of religious wackos, was sweeping the country. It was not dismissed. It somehow took on a life of its own. By any measure of human reason, the story we have heard all our lives is preposterous. God, the creator of all, submits to the indignity of a human birth? God, the first and last, dies? A dead person rises? There's no way to wrap human reason around this. It is so outlandish that if we were to give it the conscious thought it deserves, our common sense would inform us that nobody in Israel would have believed it, let alone repeated it. We've

heard it so often, though, that we no longer engage our human reason, and, instead, grant it the same sort of critical attention we grant Santa Claus. If I never do a single other thing to add to your understanding of our faith, I pray that I may reintroduce you to the wonder Luke wrote about,

Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd, “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know— this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.

If I never do a single other thing to add to your understanding of our faith I pray I may reconnect you with

the confusion and wonder of these first witnesses who were living through something altogether unique in the history of humanity – something that confused, yet strangely uplifted them. If I never do another single thing to add to your understanding of our faith I pray that I may re-mystify this account for you, for you cannot truly enter into the Pascal mystery so long as you insist on seeing the good news of the Resurrection of the Christ as “normal”, “familiar”, or even “well-loved”. Paul, writing to the church at Corinth, observed:

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Every last thing you know from a life-time of experience screams out at you that this account of a dead man rising from the grave is impossible, but until you admit that it is so, yet still enter into the witness of

those first Disciples to see that it is so, you cannot move from foolishness to salvation. I pray I may open your eyes again to the power of God, for only by the power of God are you saved!

In the 2nd Century, the father of Latin Christianity, Tertullian of Carthage, wrote a book on our faith that has survived to our time. His thesis, often paraphrased as “Credo quia absurdum” went like this:

The Son of God was crucified: there is no shame, because it is shameful.

And the Son of God died: it is by all means to be believed, because it is absurd.

And, buried, He rose again: it is certain, because impossible.

Unless you have submerged yourself in this incredible story and tasted fully of its mysteries, it will never touch you and if you are not touched, you are not blessed. This is the time of the year when we remind

ourselves to drink fully of this miracle. This is not the time of the year in which we permit dilution of the story by secular traditions, no matter how “well-loved”. Tertullian clearly tells us that your common sense will inform you (if you will take the trouble to consult it) that the Easter story is frankly impossible, yet it is central to our faith. That kind of conflict causes us real pain, and to relieve that conflict, we can either resist any suggestion that we apply our common sense to it, allowing it to live only in a mythological space in our minds, or boldly embrace our inability to understand the Pascal mystery and permit the power of God to flourish in our lives. The Easter story has to live in the same world we inhabit or it becomes irrelevant.

It’s important to understand that I’m not arguing that the accounts of the Resurrection are true because they fly in the face of rational thought. I’m saying the

accounts are true because our common sense tells us that these accounts should have been lost to the sands of history long ago – unless of course they were true, and actual people had witnessed them. The simple, unadorned fact is that people 2,000 years ago made some really outlandish claims about a Jew of no remarkable family connections, born away from the Holy City, and somehow, we know of it today and respond just as the first disciples did. You can't appreciate the power of that statement unless you first embrace the impossibility of it all, for only then can you know, really know, that for God ALL things are possible. Only then can you be truly aware of the presence of God, Himself, within His creation.

As civilization advances, the sense of wonder almost necessarily declines. Such decline is an alarming symptom of our state of mind. Mankind will not perish for want of infor-

mation; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.²

Reclaim your will to wonder, church! Embrace the wonders of your God.

AMEN

² Man Is Not Alone: A Philosophy of Religion (Abraham Joshua Heschel)

BENEDICTION

My dad was a big noise in the Boy Scouts, so naturally he wanted my brother and me to excel in that as well. I'm afraid we did not do him proud. Neither of us had any interest in Boy Scouts, but to Boy Scouts we were sent, nonetheless. One of the requirements was to learn the Boy Scout Oath and the Boy Scout Law. All we focused on was memorizing the words. The Oath and the Law might as well have been written in Hungarian for all the engagement we managed with them. Bare recitation was all that was required and bare recitation was all we gave.

That sort of sloppiness won't do at Easter. The Resurrection was God, the Creator, intervening in His creation to say that He is not bound by your ideas or mine of what is possible. Think about what those first witnesses reported. Convince yourself that the whole thing

has to be just a story, and when you get yourself convinced, ask yourself how the witness of these first Christians could possibly have persisted over millennia if it were not exactly what happened. At Easter, be frightened and confused, church, just as those first witnesses were. Grant to the Pascal mystery the honor it deserves.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be
gracious to you;
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give
you peace.

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

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