

April 8, 2018
The Second Sunday of Easter

“The First Day”
by Mary Anne Biggs

Acts 4:32-35 ~ John 20:19-31

Last week I invited someone to come back today because “we do this every week.” One of you thought I was being glib. They thought I was teasing “two-timers,” you know, those folks we only see two times a year, at Christmas and at Easter. But actually, I’m really happy to see anyone whenever they appear. No, I was serious when I said “we do this every Sunday” because every Sunday is Easter in the church. Every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. As far as we are concerned, the first day of the week is always the first day of a new creation in the eternal reign of God.

Last week we heard Mark’s version of the Easter story, or rather, the “unfinished” version that Mark hopes to see completed in our own lives ... in our own encounters with the risen Christ. This week we turn to the gospel of John and hear much the same message ... though told by means of a different literary method. Where Mark uses the literary technique of the never-ending story ... John uses what we might call the “prototype,” or “template” story ... a symbolic example of the way things happen time and again. After his narrative of the crucifixion, John tells us what happens *every* Easter ... that is *every* Sunday in the church. On the first day of the week the disciples gather in a room. On the first day of the week the disciples gather ... and the risen Christ walks among them. On the first day of the week the disciples gather ... the risen Christ walks among them ... and the disciples are transformed.

What happens when the church gathers on the first day of the week? John sees three movements taking place. First, according to John, we move from fear to peace. Second, we move from doubt to faith. And third, we move from withdrawn to sent out. The presence of the risen Christ makes it happen. As far as John is concerned, you can’t come to the gathering of the disciples on the first day and walk out unchanged. If the disciples are here, Jesus will be here, and something’s going to happen that will leave you no longer the same.

What happens as *we* gather here on the first day of the week? We gather in fear. We carry all the burdens of the week we’ve been through. Somebody’s gone to the doctor and heard troubling news. Somebody’s faced a tough situation at work. Somebody’s had a bad argument with a parent or a partner or a friend. The newspapers are telling us that things don’t seem to be going so well in the world. The television is warning us that tariffs will make things cost more and as a result ... our money won’t go as far as we hoped. The news is all bad, all the time, and the fear is palpable. It comes out as anxiety, anger, intolerance, grief, depression, disappointment, cynicism, skepticism, bitterness, helplessness, hopelessness, heartlessness, numbness, passivity, paralysis. Are all these negative emotions ... all based on fear ... here, among the Easter people of God? O, yes, we are human, and the world does its best to drag us down into the graveyard of fear-based, death-embracing self-centeredness. We gather here weary, worn, afraid ... our minds focused on our own problems.

But suddenly, Jesus is with us. We gather and the Lord is with us. We lift up our hearts. We raise our eyes. We look to God again. We remember that the good news is better than the bad news is bad. We assert hymns of praise against the death dirges of the daily news. We encourage one another with good cheer. The Lord has been sighted among us this week. He is not dead. He is not even asleep. Look, he has healed someone over there. Look, he has helped someone over there. Look, he has led us through another week, and we are still here to praise his name. Look, he is here today in our music, in our prayers, in our handshakes, and in our hugs. His love outlasts the worst the world can do to us. The Lord walks among us, and he speaks to us. He speaks through the worship service. He speaks through the choir. He speaks through the stranger we met for the first time today. He speaks through the scripture and he speaks through our own hearts. And what does he say? What does he always say? "Peace be with you." He breathes new life into us, and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." We remember ... as those disciples remembered ... what Jesus told them in the upper room the night in which he was betrayed, the night before he was crucified. This was his instructions to the disciples just before the crucifixion ... which they would not understand until after the resurrection. Jesus said:

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 ... I have said this to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world! (John 14:26-29, 16:33).

Now, it makes sense. When Jesus says "Peace be with you" and "Receive the Holy Spirit" we understand now. And in this First Day encounter with the risen Christ we move from fear to peace. It happens every week.

Every week, though, someone gets left out. There are always the Thomases who miss the transforming experience that everyone else celebrates. Maybe they find it easier to sleep in that Sunday. Maybe they are too busy to bother ... or too dragged down by the burdens they are carrying to gather with the rest of the disciples on the first day. Or they may be here, but they just don't see it. It doesn't happen for them ... they don't encounter Christ ... they are not freed from their fears ... and they may even resent those people who do feel happy and peaceful and restored. Maybe it seems to them that everyone else is blessed by God but not them. Not them. They can't believe it is real. Their bad news is real. Their burdens are real. Their sorrows are real, but the news that Christ is risen and that nothing can separate us from God's love feels like a fairy tale, self-deception, too good to be true. They just can't trust it. "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." You see? The story of Thomas is John's way of saying the same thing Mark tried to tell us last week. Easter isn't real until we experience it for ourselves. Until we meet the risen Christ in our own experience ... and know his embrace ... and feel his love and let his Spirit fill us with joy ... Easter is just a story told by fools.

I meet with so many people who struggle with doubt. They often feel guilty about it. But doubt is a natural expression of healthy spirituality. As Isaiah said, God's ways are higher than our ways, God's thoughts beyond our thoughts (Isa 55:9). In our finitude we hold illusions about God, so we are bound to be disillusioned at times. God does not act by our blueprints or timetables. The meantime between prayers and answers can be a pretty mean time. And so, we

doubt. But the Bible honors our questions ... it even expresses them for us in places. Every time some rigid orthodoxy is set forth among God's people ... which threatens to box God into a system of beliefs about God ... a prophet rises to challenge it with a counterproposal. To the chapter and verse that God will always bless them and no nation can ever defeat Israel's king enthroned in God's temple, Jeremiah offers the subversive word that God is fed up with their injustice and about to send them into exile (Jer 7). When the priests and scribes insist on racial purity for spiritual success and demand that the people send away their foreign wives ... somebody writes the book of Ruth, a love story about a Moabite woman who was more faithful than any Israelite and became an ancestor to King David himself. Throughout the scripture we have stories of honest seekers in the midst of the human struggle questioning God's faithfulness and goodness and love. "How long, O Lord?" asks the psalmist. "Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (Psalm 13:1) Jesus himself quotes another doubting psalmist from the cross. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

We all go through our Thomas times, when God seems far away. But God can stand our questions, and all will be answered in time. In the meantime, our questions and doubts keep us engaged, asking, seeking, knocking. The opposite of faith is not doubt, but despair. Only when we abandon hope ... turn away altogether ... give up on God and turn our backs ... are we lost. The Thomases among us may struggle and doubt, but they are still here with us and we should hold them close. Because as long as they are still here, the day will surely come when their questions will be answered ... and they will encounter God's grace in the deepest places of their hearts.

They may have to wait longer ... but if they will just show up ... keep coming ... joining the disciples for the celebration on the first day ... one day, it happens to them, too. Their eyes are opened. Their fears are dissolved. Their burdens are removed. They are touched by the risen Christ and understand for the first time ... or maybe once again ... the significance of his wounded side and nail-scarred hands ... just how far he will go to love them. And here on the first day gathered with the disciples ... they meet the risen Christ themselves and move from doubt to faith. It happens every week.

Every week on the first day we come here wounded, weary, anxious, doubting. We withdraw into ourselves. It is the most natural reaction to fear and pain, almost instinctive, like when you touch a hot stove. You pull back, turn in, stick with your own, avoid the new, minimize the risks, hunker down. The disciples are right at first to hide in their upper room with the doors locked. The world is hostile to their gospel of life. But their encounter with the risen Christ gives them such courage and peace ... such faith and love ... that when Jesus sends them out, they go to the very people they were fearing to bear witness to the grace they have received.

What are we afraid of? As long as there are people who profit from hatred and violence and death, the world will be hostile to the gospel of peace. As long as there are people who gain from injustice, poverty, and fear, the world will resist the gospel of love. As long as there are people who prefer hostility, division, and dominance, the world will resist the gospel of reconciliation. We naturally withdraw from such a world to the safety of our own. But once we have been released from fear ... we have the peace that passes understanding. Once we have received the Spirit of God ... we have the love that leaves no one out. Once we have met the risen Christ ... we have the mission to carry that peace and love out to the fear bound world. On the first day we gather withdrawn into our own burdens and fears ... but then we meet the risen

Christ and we are sent out with the energizing joy to tell the good news ... to be the good news in a bad news world. It happens every week.

John wants us to know what happens in the church on the first day. It's Easter! Jesus, the Christ, whom the world crucified, God raised from death. It's not just the first day of a new week. It's the first day of a new creation. We gather in his name and he comes among us. By the power of his presence we move from fear to peace ... from doubt to faith ... from being withdrawn to being sent out. It happens every week.

Peace be with you. Receive the Holy Spirit. Go out and tell the world that Jesus Christ is risen and he is here in this place every time we gather on the first day. May we pray?

O Lord, make us your Easter people. Not just one Sunday a year, but every Sunday, come among us and free us from fear and doubt. Encourage us and send us out. And let your church rise with the freedom to love all people, with the courage to bear witness and with the joy that is contagious because Jesus Christ is risen. Amen.