

Sermon for Easter IV Year C 2019
If you are . . .

It is a late December day in Jerusalem.
Jesus is walking in the portico of Solomon—
an old and revered part of the 2nd Temple of Jerusalem.
As usual, Jesus is drawing a crowd.
This time, the people gathered around him have come
to celebrate the Feast of the Dedication—
better known to us as Hanukkah—or the Feast of Lights.
This is a festival that honors the rededication
of the second Temple after its defilement
by the Syrian Greeks, 164 years before birth of Christ.
The Jews who took part in that rededication of the 2nd Temple
believed they had witnessed a miracle—
Even though there was only enough untainted oil
to keep their seven-pronged candelabra burning for a single day—
the flames continued flickering for 8 nights,
giving them time to find a fresh supply of untainted oil.

Those keeping this miracle of light,
come with a question.
Perhaps they had heard one of Jesus' enigmatic parables,
or witnessed one of his miracles.
Maybe they just wanted to trap him
into saying something they considered blasphemous.
Whatever the motive,
the question they pose is a zinger:
How long will you keep us in suspense?
If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.

Now, as I consider this question from our gospel text this morning,
I have two reactions—
On the one hand, it feels odd to be asking for clarity so soon after Easter.
Didn't we just celebrate the plainest, clearest, most irrefutable proof of
Jesus' messiah-ship possible?
How can we still be "in suspense" after his Resurrection?

On the other hand, the question, and its timing in our lectionary,
feels spot-on.
It tells us the truth about how faith works.
That is, if we're honest enough to admit it.
Most of the time, faith isn't a clean ascent from confusion to clarity,
doubt to trust.
It's a perpetual turning.
A circle we trace from knowing to unknowing,
from unbelief to belief.
From "Christ is risen," to "If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

At one time, I used to wonder if this sort of circling was a sin
or a weakness, but now I've come to think this is
just what we human beings do.
It's real life.
So . . . when you find yourself asking Jesus to "speak plainly"
into the circumstances of your life on this Fourth Sunday of Easter,
then know that you have company; you are not alone.
If something in you feels suspended, taut or impatient
for Jesus to rise again one more time
into the particulars of your comings and goings,
your nights and days—
then welcome to the ways of authentic faith.
This is how it works.

For me, the question Jesus confronts in the Temple that day hits a nerve.
It exposes all kinds of pain and yearning.

There are times when I do feel as if God is keeping me in suspense,
wounding or ignoring me with his silence.

How about you?

Do you ever find yourself starting a prayer with words
like those of the people who approached Jesus
on that long-ago December day:

If you are . . .

If you are good . . .

If you are powerful . . .

If you are loving . . .

If you are really there, really listening . . .

If you are the Messiah, then stop talking in riddles.

Stop hiding when I long for your presence.

Stop awakening in me holy hungers
that you don't seem to want to satisfy

Show up, speak plainly, act decisively!

Take this world of swirling, dubious gray,
and turn it into black and white, right or wrong, once and for all!

But how does Jesus respond?

Well, not plainly.

And not—at first glance anyway, all that kindly—

I have told you, and you do not believe

he says with a discernible impatience in his voice.

But then comes an icy clincher:

You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

Ouch!

I admit, I've spent several days wrestling
with the harshness of that sentence.

You do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep.

What can such a stark,
cut-and-dry pronouncement mean?

I suppose the easy dodge would assume
that the sentence doesn't apply to me.
After all—I'm a cradle believer.
I grew up in the church.
I know my bible.
I love the liturgy and I say my prayers.
Surely, I both believe and belong.
Except . . . when I don't.

The nagging trouble with Jesus' indictment is
that it does apply to my experience.
And not rarely . . . but often.
When I ask Jesus to stop keeping me in suspense,
when I insist that he speak plainly,
what I'm really saying is: "I don't trust you.
I don't trust your willingness to speak to me,
and I don't trust my capacity to hear your voice.
You're supposed to be my Good Shepherd.
I'm supposed to know your voice,
but sometimes I don't.
So, now what?"

At first glance, Jesus reply might appear to suggest that
belonging to him depends on believing in him.
But in fact,
what Jesus says is exactly the opposite:
you struggle to believe because you don't consent to belong.
In other words, belief doesn't come first.
It can't come first.
Belonging does.

And therein lies our hope, our consolation, and the good news.
According to this encounter with Jesus,
whatever belief I arrive at in this life
will not come from the ups and downs of my emotional life.

It will not come from a creed, a doctrine, or a cleverly worded sermon.
Rather, it will come from the daily, hourly business of belonging to
Jesus' flock—of walking in the footsteps of the Shepherd,
living in the company of fellow sheep,
and listening in real time for the voice
of the One whose classroom is rocky hills,
hidden pastures, and deeply shadowed valleys.
If I *won't* follow him into all those places—
the places of both tranquility and treachery, trust and doubt—
I will never belong to him at all.

I wonder if Jesus resisted the crowd's question that day
because it was so pitifully inadequate.
What good would it have done,
if he had stood up in the Temple at their insistence
and yelled, *Yes! Yes, in fact I am the Christ!*
Would anything have changed?
Would his parables and teachings and strange miracles
have suddenly come together into a neat package
that his listeners could pack up and carry home?
I seriously doubt it.
Jesus was a storytelling rabbi—far more interested in formation
than in formula.

Perhaps by refusing to “speak plainly,”
Jesus was honoring human life for the incredibly complicated thing it is.
After all, one doesn't “speak plainly”
about the greatest mysteries of the universe.
Jesus came to teach us about truth,
about love,
and about eternal life.
We don't just simply profess belief
in such weighty and mysterious things—
we live into them, we question them,
we believe into them and grow into them.

We wrestle with them—and even in the wrestling,
we *belong*.

Living as we do on this side of the Resurrection,
we know that even the greatest miracle in human history
was not enough to stop Jesus' followers from asking searing questions.
Even the first eyewitnesses of the empty tomb struggled with belief.
Why should we—their heirs—be superior in any way?
We are a wondering species,
a wandering species,
a species prone to stumbling all over ourselves.
It may be a somewhat humbling, even ignominious comparison,
but we are sheep.
And as sheep, our only hope is in the goodness of our loving Shepherd.

I suspect that Jesus' answer that day
was not what the people in the temple wanted to hear.
They wanted to believe from the outside.
They wanted a version of proof
that would not require them to step into the smelly sheep pen
and much around with the other sheep.
They wanted certainty without risk.
Truth without trust.
Faith built on facts.
A Messiah who would provide but not provoke.

That kind of “plain telling,” Jesus said, is not available.
The only knowing on offer is an incarnational knowing.
A knowing that happens *within* and *among* the fold.
Why?
Because the belief Jesus is interested in
has little to do with our intellects.
Or, really, *exceeds* our intellects.
To “believe” in the gospel means to trust,
to lean, to depend, to throw our lot in with.

It's an orientation of the heart.

A willingness to stake everything I've got on the person,
the character, the life, the death, and the resurrection of God's Son.

Though we think its abstract,
it's actually learned and grown through relationship.

Sheep know their shepherd because they are his—
they walk, graze, feed, and sleep in his shadow,
guided by his rod and staff,
within constant earshot of his voice.

They believe because they have surrendered to his care,
his authority, his leadership, and his guidance.

There is no belonging from the outside—
Christianity is not a spectator sport.

Belong, Jesus says. Join up, join in, come and see.

Accept the invitation to belong and follow.

Belief will come in the following.