

EXTENDING EASTER: COMING TO BELIEVE

John 20:19-30

For many, especially those who hoped to profit from the holiday, Easter is over. Lilies are no longer offered, chocolate eggs and bunnies are now reduced in cost if available at all, Easter bonnets and special clothing has been taken from the store windows and the next sales incentive---Mother's Day---is already filling shelves. Indeed, most of the Easter blossoms have withered, the baskets have been put away, the many forms of chocolate have been consumed, and the colored eggs have been turned into egg-salad sandwiches. Perhaps it is the changeable nature of Easter, moving from middle March to mid-April that causes it to be consigned to one day. Or is it because Easter is intended to focus us on the difficult, even confusing idea of resurrection?

English has regrettably moved away from the Passover experience which echoes in other languages. It has come to seemingly settle on replacing a pagan holiday celebrating the advent of spring whose goddess is Eastre. Added to this is a mixture of comments upon Christ and God. But it is far easier to decorate with flowers than it is with empty tomb even as it is simpler to sing "alleluia" than to ponder the meaning of resurrection.

It is the case, however, that the calendar of the church has provided fifty days to further consider what occurred beginning on the morning of the "third day" and extending for weeks following. Paralleling the movement from celebrating the liberation of the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage to the harvesting of the first week crop fifty days later, the church provides a 'great fifty days' to grow in understanding of the work of God in raising Jesus. To pretend that it will only require these seven weeks of the season of Easter to come to a complete comprehension of this radical idea of resurrection is to deny that our personal theologies grow and change over a lifetime just as the generations have brought forth new interpretations of the meaning of the Easter event.

We are called to extend Easter and not just for the fifty days of the season. Some might note that services held last week are not remarkably different from most other Sundays. We do not usually begin with a lament as we did last week although there is sometimes a bit of muttering about how noisy the congregation might be before someone steps to the lectern to provide welcome and greeting. Lilies are generally only available during this season, forced to bloom earlier than nature intended. These plants can be placed in the ground outdoors where they will fade away and dry up, only to appear again next winter, perhaps greening as

early as Christmas. They can be expected to bloom again, although they will wait until the warmer weather of Pentecost before show their waxy trumpets. It is not likely that we will sing “Christ the Lord is Risen Today” on any other Sunday than Easter although the words of Charles Wesley might be appropriate for resurrection people to sing at any time. The “Hallelujah Chorus” from Handel’s Messiah is ordinarily reserved for Easter in this congregation though it might be tucked into a Christmas singing of the oratorio as well. Music, especially offered by band, choir, handbells, and organ do magnify the joy of Easter but their brilliance is to be enjoyed other Sundays as well. The remainder of the Easter service is quite regular when compared to other Sunday celebrations.

And that is intentional for we are Easter people. Although many would wish to add days and sometimes months to the anticipation and celebration of Christmas, it may be a struggle to extend Easter. But any energy given over to continued rejoicing in resurrection will impact any faith we wish to grow in us. We are led in this effort by the disciples and the several accounts of post-resurrection encounters between the disciples and the Risen Christ. The gospels do not generally end with an empty tomb. Instead, further experiences of this Risen Christ are included following the announcement of Christ being raised. Mark is the anomaly among the four but even in the instance of the gospel named for him, at least two other gospel ending are provided to challenge the abrupt traditional conclusion in which a sentence in Greek is left unfinished as though the story is not yet completed. Modern translations do not allow the hearer or reader to sense this unexpected ending even as the two alternatives are regularly included in the text. Each of the other gospels has stories of encountering the Risen Christ with various interactions taking place.

And so it is with John’s Gospel which offers accounts centered on two of the disciples: Thomas and Peter with statements about the nature and meaning of resurrection tied to both of them. Today, we hear of Thomas who seeks to enjoy the person of the Risen Christ through his senses. He insists on not only seeing what has been reported to him but also feeling the nailprints and the wounded side before he will agree that the Risen Christ is among them. We sympathize with Thomas for we, also, would wish to have visible and tactile proof of the continued existence of our Lord. Earlier generations were not as interested in such proofs as we who are bound up in the scientific philosophy of the Enlightenment. We want to know how Jesus could have been raised from the dead; we are eager to learn the process by which the dead come to know life. Though called to structure our believing on resurrection, we are first caught up in deciding what we believe about the event itself. This matter will require more

than one day to come to conclusions that will stand eternally. As suggested earlier, Easter may be a lifelong experience. This may be what God intends.

John's account has much to teach us about the movement caused by resurrection. It is likely that the experience of the Risen Christ is crucial to our understanding of the purpose and power of Easter. Initially, we learn that experiences of the Risen Christ occur more than once, even to the same people. Then, we understand that each disciple and perhaps each of us may require a different experience. The group that does not include Thomas does not need to touch and is inspired to go forth by Jesus' breathing on them. Variations of the post-resurrection event as are many as the disciples and may continue to grow in number out of the variety of persons who seek this Christ. The nuance of God is eternal; let us not demand that everyone adopt only one way of experiencing this gift.

Two modern theologians, N.T. Wright and Marcus Borg create a dialogue in their book *The Meaning of Jesus*. Every section of the book presents a chapter written by each author. As might be expected because of their fundamental and liberal reputations, the chapters often appear as a debate. We can be grateful for a section on Easter and can conclude that the book being worthy of further study beyond this matter. Recalling that there were various responses to the idea of resurrection, we may again learn to live with a spectrum of believing. Gospel records that which the Pharisees believed in resurrection, the Sadducees did not. One author suggests that the empty tomb points to the Risen Christ while the other offers that the Risen Christ demands an empty tomb much as Peter rushes to the tomb to find it empty while Paul encounters the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus and is silent about a tomb. But both agree that "Jesus lives and that Jesus is Lord" and, further, that resurrection is central to the New Testament witness. One claims resurrection as literal, the other as metaphorical but both announce that however it was perceived, it had power in the lives of those who did and would follow Jesus.

Returning to the story before us from John, though Thomas sets a high bar to be achieved in order that he believe, that is he is to see the Risen Christ and to place his finger in the punctured hands and wounded side, his response is a result of Jesus' statement "Do not doubt but believe." And his response is "My Lord and my God!" It is the fruit of the experience of the Risen Christ that is the power and presence of resurrection.

Tradition states that Thomas believed to the degree that he undertook a missionary journey that led him to India where his testimony affected the lives of a significant population who still claim to be descendents of those first converted by God through Thomas, the church of Mar Thomas. Coming to

believe may be a result of our experience of the Risen Christ however this living Lord may be revealed to us. This revelation may be somewhat dependent upon how we perceive life though the power of God will always broaden our view. And coming to believe may be a lifelong challenge.

Yesterday, the confirmation class trekked to the labyrinth that is to be found at Forest Lawn. None had ever practiced this prayer form although, on a smaller scale, a labyrinth is present to the south of the sanctuary. When first approaching the pathway, one is tempted to complete the puzzle as quickly as possible, racing to the center and then out again. Subsequent experiences may allow one to travel the convoluted pathway more slowly, allowing the Spirit of God to do its work. As one concentrates on following the complicated pattern of the labyrinth, one may suddenly raise eyes to the surrounding walls or landscape and experience a moment of disorientation. Looking down again and continuing the path, the traveler will be reoriented to the way ahead. Perhaps this is the work of resurrection: disorientation in our present and reorientation to God's future for all.

Though the temptation to limit the celebration of Easter to one day, perhaps one morning, even one hour, resurrection as experience is worth far more. It is God's gift out of God's love, a gift that will be unwrapped throughout all of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.