

The Second Sunday Of Easter
St. John's, Linden Hills
John Bellaimey

The First Two Years of The Church: A Costly Business

With the Rector's permission, and hoping that you, too, will forgive me, I'd like to alter the sequence of readings this morning. I'm going to start with the Gospel, which is usually reading #3, then we'll hear the first reading, and finally the second. Don't worry, I'll tell you where to turn in the bulletin when you need to. OK, first, a little introduction to the Gospel.

Last week, Peter and John had run to the tomb to see if Mary Magdalene was right: had someone stolen Jesus' body? All that was left behind were strips of linen wrapping cloth. But why would grave-robbers leave those behind? And what about the seventy-five pounds of spices he was buried with? *That's a lot of spices.*

Peter and John went home, but Mary stayed. Her patience was rewarded, as were her tears. Two angels now appeared in the tomb, wondering why she was crying. She then turned around, and a stranger asked her who she was looking for. *Maybe this was the gardener*, she thought. *Maybe he's the one who took the body. Sir, could you take me to him? I don't care why you moved him, maybe you needed this nice tomb for some rich person, I don't know, but I will take him.* The stranger turned out to be Jesus, but mysteriously untouchable, too holy, too pure. *Touch me not, for I have not yet ascended. Don't cling to me, but don't worry, I'm not leaving yet.*

That's where the story stopped on Easter Day. This morning's episode happens that night.

A Reading from the Holy Gospel According To St. John.

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 Judeans, 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; 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.

Usually, the thing I notice in this story is Thomas' skepticism. But this year, I'm noticing Jesus, fresh from wherever the afterlife is, and the first thing he says is: "peace be with you. Whatever sins you forgive are forgiven, and whatever sins you retain are retained."

In other words, 'ok folks, the thing that got me killed? I'm giving it to you. The Temple people went nuts when I told people their sins were forgiven. They got mad when the sick were healed. Remember how they said I had no right to forgive sins? That only God could do that? That only the priests in the Temple could do the sacrifices that would get God to do that? Well, I wasn't making it up. It's called the Holy Spirit, and you've got it. It's a gift I'm giving you. A costly one, though. Go use it, and get ready for trouble.'

Because trouble was coming. I don't think any of us really appreciate how revolutionary this new religion was going to be. Let's fast forward to what's supposed to be today's FIRST reading.

Peter and John had converted 5,000 people and were then thrown in jail for the night. The next morning, they were brought before the council, along with a forty year old guy they had converted after healing him.

The elders were quite shaken up by the fact that our heroes were uneducated men. They sent Peter and John outside and argued, in executive session, about what to do. They decided to Command Them To Stop Speaking About Jesus. Sorry, said our plucky apostles, but we can't help it. And they were released, because the crowds were not going to let the officials actually gag them.

Right away, the apostles got back together and prayed for courage and once again were filled by the Holy Spirit, that famous power Jesus had told them about. They went right back to gathering crowds and telling their story: Jesus the healer, the rabbi, was also Jesus the Messiah. The Romans crucified him with help from our

wonderful leaders the high priests, but God raised him from the dead, and he's coming back. Soon. Maybe really soon.

It was around this time that the church became temporarily communist.

I'm not kidding: everyone began liquidating assets and pooling all their money. From each sale of land and houses came a growing pile of coins at the feet of the apostles. The same feet Jesus had washed not long before.

A couple of the new members were Ananias and his wife Sapphira. They brought the proceeds of the sale of their property but kept some secretly for themselves. I am not making this next part up: Peter pointed to their money pile, and asked Ananias why he kept something back, and the man dropped dead. Everyone was scared, and the young men got up and hurried to bury him. Three hours later, Sapphira showed up and Peter asked her how much money she and the hubby had gotten for the land, and she lied, too, and when Peter told her about what had just happened to Ananias, she collapsed and died, also.

So why do we never hear *this story* in stewardship sermons?

Seriously: a year or maybe two after Jesus' death, a couple dies of shame for not tithing their entire net worth. Was this what Jesus meant when he told them how costly it was going to be?

The whole church was filled with fear and awe, but the leaders, the apostles, were filled with courage. They kept preaching and healing. New members kept joining. They met in a place called Solomon's Porch. Regular members kept their distance, unless they had sick relatives or friends, in which case, they brought them to the apostles. The word went out that if *just Peter's shadow* fell on you as he walked by, you could be cured.

All this was right under the nose of the entire religious establishment, with their huge temple and their linen vestments, their incense and sacrifices, and the prayers that only priests were allowed to say. The priests' making a livelihood depended on their keeping their jobs. And all this unpaid amateur hour spirituality was making organized religion look *baaaaaad*.

The high priests were enraged with jealousy. Enraged like Romney and McCain watching Trump.

The high priests were overshadowed like Salieri at a Mozart concert, or like whoever the poor schmo was that warmed up the Ed Sullivan show for the Beatles.

Left in the dust like Yahoo watching Google. Like Vikings fans after that awful playoff game with the New York Giants.

Enough comparisons. The high priests had our heroes arrested again, but during the night, an angel came and sprung them from jail. Like angels do. Peter and John headed right on back to Solomon's Porch and went right on back to using Jesus' name. The temple police came and arrested them for a third time. At which point we arrive at today's story, the first reading.

A Reading From The Acts Of The Apostles.

When the temple police had brought the apostles, they had them stand before the council. The high priest questioned them, saying, "We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and you are determined to bring this man's blood on us." But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than any human authority. The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins. And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him."

-For the last time, you two, whose name are you using to do all these healings?

-Jesus of Nazareth's.

-We told you not to do that.

-God told us to keep doing it. The Holy Spirit is our witness. Our proof.

-We're warning you: God tells US what to do, not amateurs like you lot.

You know what *amateur* means? It's someone who does something for *love*. They did not love being thrown in prison, nor would they love it when, just a couple of years later, Stephen would become the first martyr, stoned to death for this very crime. But love told them not to stop. To be not afraid.

Anyway, the story we just heard keeps going like this (how come the church cuts so much good stuff out of the Sunday morning readings?): someone made a motion in favor of the death penalty. Stoning. And then a famous Pharisee named Gamaliel, widely respected, got up to speak.

"Men of Jerusalem. Pay close attention to what you are about to do. Awhile back, a man called Theudas looked like a messiah, too. Four hundred of his followers were killed along with him. And then there was Judas the Galileean, but his followers were scattered. My advice is to leave these men alone. Their plans will probably come to nothing. But if their power is really from God, no one will be able to stop them."

The vote ended up being to have Peter and John beaten, and warned again not to use Jesus' name. And released for a third time. But the apostles went right on back to their work, going from house to house and even back to the Temple courts.

They stepped into history. Roman scholars like Josephus wrote about the followers of Jesus. They said he was the Messiah. They converted thousands, first Jews and later Greek-speakers all over the Roman Empire.

One of that same Rabbi Gamaliel's most famous students, Saul of Tarsus, gave up persecuting the Christians and became Paul. Decades later, he would die in Roman captivity. Peter, too, accepted crucifixion rather than deny Jesus as he had done before the rooster could crow at dawn on Good Friday.

Only John lived to old age, and wrote today's Gospel from his island of Patmos. John also wrote the Book of Revelations, the dream of the end-times: an awful apocalypse. A near-victory by the beastly forces of evil, defeated by a triumphant Christ, conquering the whole universe for the empire of God. At the end of time, Jesus settles down on the heavenly throne at last.

That's the Epistle for today. Let's have the very last Psalm, Number 150 now; and then the famous Alpha and Omega Epistle from John's Book of Revelations. They both are full of joy at Christ's triumph, and so should we be.

A Reading From The Book Of Revelations.

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail. So it is to be. Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

So, finally, here is my 157-word homily:

This morning, we see the first two years of the church: it started with Jesus, risen from the dead, giving our ancestors the fearsome power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit gave them courage, and so why should we not be courageous? And joyful? Why should we not be amateurs: people who do what we do with love?

Our forebears were so convinced that Jesus rose from the dead--*even good ol' doubting Thomas*--that they ignored threats. They forgave their enemies. They shared everything.

Unfortunately, the church was eventually domesticated and became the official church of the Empire. Earnest professional scholars, not amateurs, wrote the words we are about to say.

They are still excellent words.

But even as we say them, let us remember: the Holy Spirit is never domesticated. Once upon a time, saying these things could get you killed, but they still honor everything we really want or need: courage, joy, peace, and love.

The service continues with the Nicene Creed, found on page 358 of the *Book Of Common Prayer*. We believe in one God.....