

Blessed Believers

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The Second Sunday of Easter
April 11, 2010

Acts 5:12-39; Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Text: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." -- John 20:29

You may or may not have noticed over the years that historically we don't include announcements with the Easter Sunday bulletin in this church. That was a custom I encountered when I arrived here, and the church secretary at the time told me it had been the practice for as long as she could remember. When I asked her why we did that, she said it was her understanding that the announcements were omitted as a sign of respect for the importance of Easter day when, as you saw in Jaroslav Pelikan's words on last week's cover, "nothing else matters."

Well, as all beginning ministers know – at least the ones who are going to survive in ministry – when the church secretary tells you that this is how it's done here, you don't mess with it and you do as you're told.

And so I did for the first six Easters I celebrated with you; there were no announcements in the Easter bulletin.

But this year, as the church staff and I worked our way through the various services and activities of this rather busy little church, I realized that it would be to everyone's advantage if the Easter bulletin included the regular announcement sheet, so that people could learn what they didn't already know and be reminded of what they did. It occurred to me that life continues in the days and weeks following Easter in many respects just as it did before, and that the work of informing and reminding folks about their life both in this church and especially outside of it carries on after Easter no less than it does before it.

And so I included the announcement sheet in last Sunday's bulletin as usual, and as far as I can tell, it didn't diminish the importance of our celebration of Jesus' resurrection. I can't say for sure that the sheet did any of you any good, but I'm fairly sure it did none of you any harm.

Life does go on after Easter in many respects as it did before, and for lots of folks, that the problem with Easter.

If Easter were really all that ministers and churches like to say that it is – the day that makes all things new, the day unlike any other, the great before-and-after in world history – if Easter really were all of this and all the rest of the publicity we generate about it, shouldn't life *not* go on pretty much business as usual after Easter? Shouldn't we all be as different inside as our new Easter outfits last week made us outside? Shouldn't we all be introducing ourselves to one another as the new creations in Christ that Easter says we can be?

Easter came and went – we celebrated while it lasted – and we're still here, mired in the big history of world politics and deep ecology on the one hand, and, on the other, in the small history of our immediate joys and concerns.

Life keeps going on after Easter, depressingly similar, so it seems, to how it went

on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Terrorists continue to kill the innocent, Iran continues to thumb its nose at world opinion, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to grind up lives and treasure. This is the stuff of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday; it certainly doesn't feel like the stuff of Easter.

One of my preacher friends says that he used to think that it was much harder for people to come to church on Good Friday than on Easter until one of his parishioners said to him, "I don't like Good Friday, but it makes sense; I love Easter, but it doesn't" (Gomes 1999:209).

Good Friday makes sense to all of us in our broken, brutal world. Good Friday is the very embodiment of that German word *Realpolitik*, getting things done in this world guided by the ways of this world. Good Friday is summed up in Caiaphas' words that "it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:50). That's Good Friday thinking. That's getting things done in this world the way the world gets things done. Caiaphas and Pilate and Herod and all the rest – they were realistic leaders of people at a difficult time, and the brutality we see in the stories from Good Friday reflect the brutality of the world these men shaped and served.

And that world, as we all know all too well, did not disappear on Easter morning. Good Friday may have passed grimly away, but the world of Good Friday did not. You and I know it from our own experience and knowledge of the world, and Jesus' followers knew it from their knowledge and experience of the world. It would be easy for me to begin the litany of woes right now about the number of children who have died of malnutrition since I began preaching, or the number of women who have been battered, or the number of young lives lost to handgun violence.

Good Friday may be a thing of the past, but the world that gave us Good Friday is not, and that's the truth that lands us right in the middle of today's reading from the gospel of John, that wonderful story about Thomas the doubter.

Thomas the doubter asks to see proof of the resurrection by seeing the evidence of the world he knows. Thomas the doubter is operating as all sensible, methodical people work, which is from the known to the unknown. Thomas knows the world of Good Friday; he may have abandoned Jesus with most of the other disciples on Thursday, but he knew all too well what was taking place on Friday at the Place of the Skull. Thomas knows that world, and he asks for evidence of that world in this new world of which he knows nothing, the world of resurrection: "'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.'"

Thomas wants proof that the Jesus he followed, listened to, lived with, trusted, believed in, and abandoned to the howling mob – he wants proof that this same Jesus has not been destroyed by the world of Good Friday. Thomas the doubter is trying to connect the dots of his and his friends' and his leader's shattered lives. Thomas is trying to bridge that ugly, awful ditch between the world we all know and endure, and the world promised us by God, the world in which divine love not only does not perish, but has the final word. That's the struggle Thomas the doubter is wrestling with, and for his labors we should not condemn him, but rather give him credit, for those struggles – his struggles, Thomas' struggles, the doubter's struggles – are very much our own.

There's not one of us here this morning who has not, at one time or another, wondered if any of this makes sense. Good Friday makes sense; Easter doesn't. In this world, the dead stay dead. In this world, you don't get by giving away; you get by taking. In this world, you impose peace by using force, not love. In this world, evil has to be restrained, not exorcised.

Jesus cut a pretty figure, but he wasn't practical, and we are practical people living in a practical world with practical problems, and that's the reality, the hard truth that

Thomas voiced when he asked to see Good Friday proof of Easter life.

And miracle of miracles, that's exactly what he got. God, in boundless mercy, granted to Thomas the doubter the vision he needed to see in order to believe. Thomas needed to see the before as well as the after, and he saw it. He saw, in the figure of his lord and his God, the proof that the world of Good Friday is not lost but is redeemed in Easter.

That's what Thomas saw and that's when Thomas believed, and Jesus said that those of us who are not as privileged as Thomas are even more blessed than he. Jesus said that those of us who do not see the vision of the nail-scarred hands and yet believe – we are more blessed than those granted the miraculous sight. Jesus said that those of us who believe not because of the evidence but in spite of the evidence – we're the ones truly blessed.

My friends, Easter is not about the end of the world of Good Friday; that's a delusional fantasy. You and I both know that Jesus' resurrection did not put an end to the doings of a Pilate or a Herod or a Caiaphas or the screaming mob or the cowering disciples. For every Easter Sunday, we know there comes an Easter Monday. That's the truth.

But it's not the whole truth, for the whole truth – the truth that Christians have grasped, believed, and proclaim – is that it is precisely that world of Good Friday, that broken and bleeding world that continues centuries past the first Easter day, it is *that* world for which Jesus the Christ was raised from death.

Jesus was not raised for the sake of heaven; heaven doesn't need a resurrection. This world needs undying love. This world needs the reassurance that suffering is not the last word. This world needs to be reminded, in the lovely words of the psalmist, that “weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes with the morning.”

And it is this world, with all its stupidity and brutality and ugliness and pain and sorrow, to which the followers of the risen Christ are called. We are not called in this life to spend our days in an artificial heaven of Easter lilies and Easter hymns; we are called to bear in our own bodies the risen life of Jesus the Christ into the places where it is needed most, and in the power of that risen life “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1).

The Easter lilies and the Easter hymns don't need what we have, my Easter friends; the oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captive and the imprisoned do. That for which Christ came, died, and was raised is not Easter Sunday; it's Easter Monday. There's our mission, there's our calling, and there's our life. Thanks be to God.