

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Eastertide**

**John 20:19-31; Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; I Peter 1:3-9**

**John 20:19-31** is the formal completion of the Gospel of John. It is true that there is still an additional chapter (ch. 21), but the twentieth chapter ends in such a decisively-finalized manner that it is clear that the author meant the book to end with John 20:31. Biblical scholars have puzzled about this discrepancy for centuries, but the present generally-accepted consensus is that John ended his book with 20:31, then later penned an epilogue (or disciples of his wrote the epilogue) which was attached to the book. No extant copies of the Gospel of John come without the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, so if it were added, that addition happened before or soon after the book's initial release.

The Gospel lesson for today that draws the Gospel of John to a close consists of three segments. Verses 19-23 deal with the occasion of Jesus' appearance to his disciples on His day of resurrection. Verses 24-29 deal with Jesus' appearance a week later to the disciple Thomas, who was not present in the gathering on Easter Sunday. Then, verses 30-31 provide the formal conclusion of the Gospel of John. Thus, the originally final stories of this gospel all deal with Jesus' appearance after his resurrection, first to Mary Magdalene, then to the disciples, and finally to the missing Thomas. This ending doesn't deal with any resolution regarding the denying Peter, however, and thus the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter belatedly deals with that piece of unfinished business.

The first story of this Sunday's Gospel lesson is of particular importance. The story is straightforward enough. Jesus appears to all his disciples except Thomas, who were gathered in a home with the doors "locked for fear of the Judeans". Jesus suddenly appears in their midst, and says to them, "Peace be with you". Thus, he wishes them shalom. The text tells us that "the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord". Jesus then says to them, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Then, breathing upon them the gift of the Holy Spirit, he commands them "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (20:23). That is the conclusion of this story.

What is actually occurring in this story is John's interpretation of the commissioning of Jesus' disciples. It is the apex, the high moment of the Gospel story itself, that moment in John's gospel toward which the entire book points. Therefore, it is crucial that we understand the lesson that John is seeking to communicate to his readers.

A commission is the call by Jesus to his followers for them to undertake an imperative function of their ministry. A commission is not an optional activity which the Church may choose to undertake. It is an imperative of ministry, a trust and responsibility which must shape both the Church's conceptual framework and its praxis of ministry.

To truly understand Jesus' command in today's Gospel lesson as the commission of the Gospel of John, one must recognize that this was the final gospel that was written. The Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke had been written during the twenty-five years preceding the writing of the Gospel of John. And it is clear both from the commission John records here as well as the over-all tenor of his book that John felt that in their respective commissions, Matthew, Mark and

Luke had left out a critical imperative of the work of the church commanded by Jesus. And it was John's intention to correct that oversight.

Their respective commissions? Yes – their respective commissions. We tend to think of the Gospel of Matthew as containing the “Great Commission”. But, in reality, each of the four gospels contains a commission from Jesus that in essence passes on Jesus' primary work to the disciples and thus to the church to be continued. Each of the commissions peculiar to a given Gospel is their respective call to the church to continue the unique ministry “into all the world” that Jesus was undertaking throughout that specific gospel. Matthew, concerned to present Jesus as Israel's rightful (and prophesied) Messiah, has Jesus commission his followers to be the creator of a New Israel, learning, following and obeying a new Law (Matt. 28:18-20). The essential task of the Church, Matthew insists, is to make disciples for Jesus from those who were once disciples of Moses. When one obeys that new Law and embraces that new life, Matthew teaches, one will discover the “Great I Am” in the person of Jesus the Messiah.

Mark, concerned with Jesus' way becoming the “third way” which reconciles together Jew and Gentile (and any other division of life), stresses in his commission (Mark 16:15-18) that it is not a single race or class of people who will receive the gospel. Rather, Jesus' “third way” is for each individual – whether Jew or Gentile – who will choose to hear and respond. If they believe and are baptized – whether Jew or Gentile – they will be saved. If they reject the gospel, no matter what their race, ethnicity, historicity, tradition or forebears, they will be rejected. Thus, to Mark's Jesus, the Church, whether in Israel or among the Gentiles, will be called to the same ministry and empowered by the same Spirit who called and empowered Jesus. They will preach with Jesus' power, heal and care for people as did Jesus, and seem almost invulnerable and fearless before the principalities and powers (“snakes and deadly things”).

Luke's gospel is the only one that sets out God's commission to Jesus (Luke 4:18-19). Jesus' personal commission is to bring good news to the poor, to seek the release of the captives, to bring sight to the blind, to work for the liberation of the oppressed and to insist upon the redistribution of national wealth (the meaning of the phrase, “the year of the Lord's favor”; see Lev. 25:10). According to Luke, Jesus' work is the work of liberation – not just liberation from sin, but liberation from poverty, social domination, physical infirmities, political oppression and economic exploitation.

And that to which Jesus is called, Jesus calls his followers. When Jesus proclaimed only in Luke, “The kingdom of God is among you” (17:21), he was indicating that the seeds of the kingdom had already been planted by him both in us and in our midst. So it then becomes our responsibility to carry on the ministry he had initiated. “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, cure the sick who are there, and say to them, ‘The kingdom of God has come near to you’” (10:8-9). “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. . . . For I am among you as one who serves” (22:26-27). Thus, God's commission to Jesus is also Jesus' commission to us – Jesus' church!

But something is still missing! It is true that Jesus' imperative of ministry to the church is for the church to be primarily about working for the liberation of humanity from oppression and exploitation (Luke), proclaiming the good news of God's reconciling salvation in Christ (Mark)

and to make disciples of all peoples (Matthew). But it is more than that. There is another absolutely strategic ingredient that is missing. And it is that missing ingredient of mission that John writes about in his Gospel, reclaiming that ingredient as absolutely essential to the mission of the church.

The two great assertions from the Gospel of John are these: that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, and that if we receive that Life by abiding in Christ (John 15:4-5; 17:21), we become Christ's new community in the world. Because Jesus is the Countercultural Christ who offers humanity a new way of life (John 3:16), we who embrace him and are embraced by him become God's new countercultural community in the world – the Church!

It is in the light of these two great assertions that the Great Commission in John both becomes obvious and begins to make sense. This is Jesus' Great Johannine Commission. "Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

There are three highly strategic and inter-related elements within John's Great Commission. The first is found in the first words Jesus speaks as he presents this commission. Those words are "Peace be with you". That was not simply a greeting. That was not simply a wish to "have a good day!" What Jesus actually said was "*Shalom* be with you". And wishing one "shalom" in the Jewish tradition was not simply wishing one another 'peace'. The Hebrew word, *shalom*, caught up within that single word the entire purpose of Hebrew life and belief. That one word encapsulated what it meant to be a part of the Jewish community. The Hebrew word *shalom* captures the Hebrew vision of human society, the non-human world, and even the environment as a relational whole.

"Shalom" occurs when "right religion" is being practiced – that is, when the beliefs, values and religious activities of the nation's leaders and people are bringing them together to build a society centered in an active, dynamic relationship with God and, consequently, a compassionate and caring relationship toward each other (Num. 6:24-26; Deut. 10:12-20; Phil. 3:10). "Shalom" occurs when the people and their political systems are acting justly and mercifully toward each other. The mark of a shalom society is that its political institutions are acting justly in their management of public life while being particularly compassionate toward those who could be most vulnerable (Micah 6:8; Deut. 16: 19-20; 17:12-20; Col. 1:15-20). "Shalom" occurs when poverty is being eliminated. Israel and the Church are to perceive their wealth as a gift from God, a common wealth God has invested in them so that they could be good trustees of it. The end for which they are to manage that wealth is the elimination of poverty for everyone in that society (Deut. 6:10-12; 15:4-11; Lev. 25:23-34). Political justice, economic equity, elimination of poverty, and people "at one" with each other and with God make up, together, a community of "shalom".

A primary message of the Gospel of John is that the "Judeans" – that is, the Jewish political, economic and religious hierarchy – were not committed to building a "shalom community". Because this leadership was encapsulated in a religious office -- the office of the high priest – that leadership was supposed to be obedient to the Law of Moses (which, if they had been, would

have required them to be working for a society of political justice, economic equity and spiritual relationality). But, instead, they were committed to the building of their own power, prestige and plenty and thus, out of necessity, acting exploitively and oppressively toward the peasants of the land. It was because of their commitment to domination and control that Jesus both opposed them and worked to create an alternative society – a society counter to their culture and to Roman culture – the Church!

So when Jesus begins his Great Commission of John with the words, “Shalom be with you”, he is blessing them with the reminder that they are called by God to be about the task of being the shalom community in their life together and in their treatment of each other. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”, Jesus added. As he was the harbinger of God’s shalom community by being the countercultural Christ who came up against the Judean and Roman systems and called them to accountability, so his followers are now being called to be, in their life together and in their actions, the shalom community, coming up against the systems and calling them to accountability, as well.

The second element within John’s Great Commission for Jesus’ alternative community is “Receive the Holy Spirit”. The text tells us that immediately after Jesus commissioned his disciples to go forth as Jesus’ new community of faith, “he breathed on them”, thus giving through his breath the Breath of Life – the Holy Spirit. The implication here is that we cannot build the shalom community through dint of our own determination. It takes the grace of God working within us, among us and even in spite of us to truly create the shalom community. And we need to operate in that awareness. The success of building a truly authentic community of shalom is based upon a recognition that it must always come to us as grace. It comes about as God works within and among us to create community, and our task is to get our own agendas and convictions out of the way in order to allow the Spirit to do His work within our midst in order to empower us to be, in deed as well as in word, God’s alternative community.

The final element of John’s Great Commission is also the most important element. “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained”, Jesus commanded his followers (20:23).

There can be no authentic community without forgiveness. As the branch grafted into the Christ vine and thus an extension of Jesus, the Church is here commissioned by Jesus to do what only God could formerly do – to forgive and to retain sin! The task is not to proclaim the forgiveness of sin. The task, as commanded by Jesus, is to actually forgive or retain sin!

This is the commission most embraced by the Roman Catholic Church in its sacrament of confession. And likely, because it has been so strongly embraced by the Catholic Church, it is the act either most rejected or most ignored by the Protestant Church. In the Roman Catholic tradition, the priest stands in the place of Christ and, in the confessional, requires divulgence of sin, repentance and the completion of a prescribed penance before granting forgiveness.

But it is important to affirm that the task of the Church as forgiving and retaining sins is not peculiar to Roman Catholicism. The author of John saw the forgiveness and retaining of sins as absolutely essential to the building of an authentic counter-cultural community. And the

Protestant reformers understood exactly that. In rejecting the Catholic formulation of this practice, they did not abandon the concept but rather sought to “reform” it through their doctrine of the “priesthood of all believers”. Rather than “toss the baby out with the bath”, the Reformers sought to preserve the baby while tossing out the bathwater of the confessional!

Martin Luther’s formulation of the “priesthood of all believers” was designed to deal with the necessity for this strategic ministry in the building of the Christian community. The church today misunderstands the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers as every person being his own priest before God. But that is not what Luther taught. What Luther taught was that every Christian is the priest of his or her Christian neighbor. We are each other’s priest, hearing confession and granting absolution. Luther put it most plainly:

“He (the Christian) is a priest not to his own advantage but to serve other men. This service is to bear the sins and iniquities of others, lest they be the chief actors both in their own perdition as well as that of others”.<sup>1</sup>

What Luther sought to do was not to remove from the Church the responsibility of participating in the forgiveness of sins. Rather, it was to remove from a particular class of Christians – the ordained priesthood – that exclusive responsibility in order to distribute that privilege upon the entire Christian community.

John Calvin stressed the importance of the one seeking forgiveness to make both private and public confession. “The secret confession which is made to God is followed by voluntary confession to men, whenever that is conducive to the divine glory or our humiliation”,<sup>2</sup> Calvin wrote. He recommends the pastor to play this role, but leaves open to “any particular individual into whose bosom we are to disburden our feelings” such hearing of one’s confession. Calvin then states most specifically, “For as the duty of mutual admonition and correction is committed to all Christians, but is specially enjoined on ministers, so while we ought all to console each other mutually, and confirm each other in confidence in the divine mercy, we see that ministers, to assure our consciences of the forgiveness of sins, are appointed to be the witnesses and sponsors of it, so that they are themselves said to forgive sins and loose souls”.<sup>3</sup>

But the priesthood of all believers moves beyond forgiving sins to the task of retaining sins, as well. To retain sins simply means that the Christian community ought not to be too quick to forgive sins. Otherwise, that community can make grace cheap. And although grace is free, it is certainly not cheap, because it cost Jesus his life! There must be a place in the church for authentic awareness, confession and repentance of one’s sin. But there are also those occasions when Christian believers refuse to face the reality of their sins. In such cases, the church must be willing to hold those people publicly accountable for their sins, and to refuse to grant forgiveness (i.e., to “retain” sins) until there is appropriate repentance on the part of the sinner.

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *Epistle to the Hebrews*. Library of Christian Classics, Vol. XVI (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Volume One, Book Three, 4:10 (Grand Rapids, MI.: Wm. B. Erdmann’s Publ. Co., 1957), p. 543.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Volume I, Book III, 4:12, p. 544.

Why would the Jesus of the Gospel of John enjoin the church to forgive and to retain sins as a primary commission of the church? The chief aim of the author of John was to build the case for the church being a genuine, balanced and countercultural community of shalom, the authentic extension of Jesus Christ in the world today. And you can't have authentic community without the willingness to face, confront, forgive or retain sins. To do otherwise is to succumb both to cheap grace and to a collection of people who are as corrupt in their dealings with each other as the Judean elite was with the Jewish peasants of Jesus' day.

John would add the granting of the forgiveness of sins to the other commissions championed by the writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke. As the authentic Jesus lies in the junction point between all four Gospels, so the authentic and balanced church lies between the acting out of all four commissions. The Body of Christ is called to work for the political and economic liberation of humanity, to proclaim the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ, to grant forgiveness of sins and to make disciples of all people. It is called to the entirety of this ministry. The truly faithful church is a balanced church. And a balanced church is one that takes all four commissions equally seriously in the carrying out of its life and work in the world!

Thus, John has the resurrected Jesus meet with his disciples and commission them to "forgive and retain sins" as the essential task that builds Jesus' authentic shalom community. But there is one problem with Jesus' giving of that commission. One of the disciples is missing. And that disciple not only is not aware of this new commission; he doesn't even know that Jesus has risen from the dead! His Jesus is still in a tomb. What is to be done?

"But Thomas, 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 fingers 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 door was shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Shalom 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" (20:24-29).

This story is popularly known as the story of "Doubting Thomas". But it is not about doubting Thomas. It is about the forgiving Jesus!

Thomas begins where all the disciples were before they saw Jesus. In fact, Thomas begins where all of us once began! There is no difference between Thomas and us.

The story begins with the disciples declaring excitedly to Jesus' missing disciple, "We have seen the Lord!" That is exactly what Mary had said to them one week earlier when she returned from the empty tomb (vs. 18). They had been understandably skeptical. Wouldn't you be if you heard that someone you knew told you that someone whom you loved had died and risen again from the grave? So the situation was no different with Thomas. The disciples had doubted Mary's testimony until they saw Jesus face-to-face and had inspected "the mark of the nails in his hands and in his side". So now that they believed Jesus was alive and gave the same testimony to

Thomas, he reacted in the exact same way. Yet, had not also Mary? She had heard the angel's testimony (20:12-13), and yet she had not believed. She still assumed that the Jesus standing in front of her was the gardener until he told her otherwise (20:14-18). All those who followed Jesus reacted to the news with the same level of disbelief. Wouldn't you?

Then, as he had with Mary and the other disciples, Jesus appears to Thomas. And he perfectly parallels the arguments Thomas had stated to the believing disciples. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of those nails" – "Thomas, put your finger here and see my hands". "Unless I place my hand in his side, I will not believe" – "Thomas, reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe"!

The question is belief. Because this story has become such a well-known story and because the title "Doubting Thomas" has become so affixed to the story, it is virtually impossible to translate the last sentence of verse 27 correctly. But Jesus did not say to Thomas, "Do not doubt by believe". The Greek word translated "doubt" (*apistos*) does not mean what the English word "doubt" means (i.e., uncertainty, hesitation or to lack confidence). It means "unbelief". Therefore, what Jesus was actually saying to Thomas was "Do not hold onto unbelief, but believe". It is all right, when faced with something impossible to immediately embrace like a person rising from the dead (as did Mary and the other disciples as well as Thomas), to not believe what has been reported to you. The problem is not that of doubting. The problem is that of refusing to believe when sufficient proof has been provided that the unbelievable is true (such as the resurrected Jesus being physically alive, speaking to you and offering the option of inspecting his wounds). The issue is belief. And the real question with Thomas is whether he will finally believe. If he does, then his immediate indiscretion of initial unbelief will be forgiven by Jesus, and he will be enthusiastically welcomed back into Jesus' shalom community once again!

Thomas' response tells it all. "Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God"" (vs. 28). Thomas does not simply go from unbelief to belief. He goes from unbelief to total embrace! For Thomas gives the most profound and courageous testimony that any person gives in the entirety of the Gospel of John. He names Jesus as "Lord" and "God". Jesus is "Lord" – the ruler of the world (and not Caesar nor even Moses). But Jesus is also "God" – God incarnate in a human being. It is a fitting testimony with which to end the Gospel of John.

But not quite! Jesus replies, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (vs. 29). With these words, the author of the Gospel of John intentionally takes the gospel out of the first century and thrusts it into the unmarked future. Only those in the first half of the first century will have had the opportunity to know Jesus in the flesh. And only the chosen in the first half of the first century would have the privilege of having seen Jesus risen from the dead and enfleshed sufficiently that they could thrust their finger into his nail-holes and their hand into his torn-open side. But having seen the incarnate Jesus is no prerequisite to believe in him! Particularly blessed are those future generations who choose to believe in Jesus as Lord and God and to join his shalom community on the basis of his words and actions alone, and not on anything they have seen or experienced.

John has now completed his task. He had declared that the eternal Word, who is God and was in the beginning with God, had become “flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (1:14). John had displayed through the telling of the story of his ministry that this enfleshed Word was the specific human being – Jesus of Nazareth (1:19—20:29). John had shown that Jesus had repeatedly confronted the “Powers that Be” of both Israel and Rome, calling each to their God-determined roles of working for justice, equity and (in the case of the Jewish leaders) relationship with God, exposing their preference to use their respective offices to dominate the people and to build their own power, prestige and plenty. John had demonstrated that this Jesus called a new people to found a new “Israel”, a new community of shalom living together as God intended sharing wealth, treating each other with justice and with compassion, and loving God. John had exposed the commitment of the Judeans and of Rome to destroy Jesus because his critique had robbed them of their power and position, but he had turned his trial into their trial where their shameful commitment to domination had been clearly exposed and he had somehow turned his crucifixion into an enthronement. Finally, John had concluded with the good news of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, which had infused new life and hope into Jesus’ shalom community, so that they could now join with him in working for the transformation of the world. So now, it is time for John to conclude his great book.

“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” (20:30-31).

Thus, the Gospel of John comes to its original ending, reminding the reader that this was not a history of Jesus, but a gospel of Jesus. Its aim was not to simply tell the story of Jesus’ life (first this happened, then this happened, then that happened), but rather to tell the truth about Jesus – so that the reader would recognize him for who he is, the Word of God made flesh. This gospel was written so that, like Thomas, the reader “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God”. For only by believing in the countercultural Christ can we become a part of Christ’s countercultural community – community as God intended it to be – and can thus live our lives to bring justice, equity and the abolition of poverty to the earth within a shalom that is centered on the praise and enjoyment of God forever! Only by so believing and acting will we experience “life in his name”.

**Acts 2:14a, 22-32** is Luke’s theological interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as given through a speech made by Peter. It is important to recognize that the four gospels and Acts do not provide a history of Jesus’ crucifixion. The reports are chock-full of historical fact, but what is essentially presented is a theological explanation of Jesus’ crucifixion, using the history of the event as a vehicle for that interpretation. That is nowhere as clearly evident as it is in this public sermon delivered by Peter on the Day of Pentecost.

“You that are Israelites”, Peter declared, “listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know – this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law” (2:22-23).



Here the historical and theological are intertwined. The historical facts are these: “Jesus of Nazareth, a man” who, in his ministry, committed “deeds of power, wonders and signs” had been “handed over” to the Judean elite, the religious-political leaders of Israel, who got him “killed by the hands of those outside the law” (i.e., the Roman government), executed through “crucifixion”. Those are the historical facts. But note how Peter interprets those facts.

Luke has Peter declare that Jesus was a man “attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders and signs that God did through him among you”. There is no historical question that Jesus did “deeds of power” in his ministry – healings, miracles (feeding 5,000), even raising the dead. His very credibility was built upon those “deeds of power”. But here, Peter attributes his miracle-working power to God who was working through Jesus. Elsewhere, the Pharisees attributed that same power to Satan (Luke 11:15). That is the theological interpretation the Pharisees placed upon those objective acts, primarily to validate their continued opposition to him and the threat he posed to their domination of the people. But the theological interpretation Peter (and Luke) place upon the very-same deeds of power is that this was God working through Jesus in order to transform the world.

Peter continues this theological interpretation of Jesus’ death: “this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”. The Jewish clerical establishment (in John’s term, the “Judeans”) and Rome conspired together to execute Jesus. But Peter states that Jesus’ death was neither accidental nor the end-result of a conspiracy. It came about “according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God”. Jesus’ death was part of God’s “plan”. The Greek word translated as “plan”, *boule*, means “design”, “intentionality” or “will” (e.g., 4:28; 13:36; 20:27; Luke 7:30). Peter is theologically interpreting the death of Jesus by insisting on two parallel thoughts. He is maintaining that God intended for Jesus to die. His death was necessary for the liberation and salvation of the world. But that necessity that Jesus die does not absolve the perpetrators of that execution from their crime. They still committed evil in seeking Jesus’ crucifixion. Thus, Peter is being very careful in stressing both that God ordained the death of His Son, but that Israel’s and Rome’s religious and political systems bore responsibility and the consequent guilt for crucifying Jesus (cf. 17:26; II Chr. 25:16; Jer. 21:10; Dan. 11:36; Acts 3:15-18; 5:30; 10:39).

Peter then moves on to a declaration of Jesus’ resurrection. “But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power” (vs. 24). He then quotes Psalm 16:8-11 and alludes to Psalm 132:11 to demonstrate that the concept of God’s victory over the dominating powers through the resurrection of God’s chosen One is not peculiar to the Christians, but is an integral part of Jewish theology and belief. Thus, he argues, “Since David was a prophet, he knew that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would put one of his descendants on his throne. Foreseeing this, David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying ‘He was not abandoned in Hades, nor did his flesh experience corruption’” (vss. 30-31).

Having demonstrated that the resurrection of the Messiah was an idea that originated within the Hebrew scriptures, Peter then concludes his argument with the declaration, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses” (vs. 32). This declaration has, in turn, placed Peter in the position that he will be able to support his main argument that will come later in this

public address, “Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made Jesus both Lord and Messiah – this Jesus whom you crucified” (vs. 36). That declaration would, in turn, lead to a massive response on the part of those hearing Peter that Pentecost day, for 3000 would be converted to Christ and the Christian community would be established “devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers” (vs. 42). Thus, the church would be born that Pentecost day through the faithful witness of Peter and of the whole church!

**Psalm 16** is a hymn of delight, confidence and joy of the worshipper of God that is the result of remaining in God’s presence. It is contrasted with those who yield to the worship of Ba’al who become absorbed into the religious systems of pagan nations that seek to control and dominate the people. “Those who choose another god (and thus, the political domination, economic greed and religious control of those nations) multiply their sorrows” (vs. 4). Rather, the Psalmist declares, “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot” (vs. 5). The result of committing one’s self to Yahweh and a relational faith that is lived out in justice and in sharing, is that “the boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage” (vs. 6). One enters upon “the path of life” and “fullness of joy” by thus entering into God’s presence (vs. 11), for life in relationship with God and with God’s people living in a shalom community together will endure.

There is one portion of this psalm that is particularly referenced by New Testament preachers. “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption” (vs. 10). Sheol, to the ancient Hebrew mind, was a shadowed, dark place where the dead continue to exist in the underworld, a place where all relationship and interaction with Yahweh was at an end. To the Israelites who both wrote this psalm and who used it in their worship or devotion, these words provided promise that those touched by and embracing Yahweh’s “steadfast love” would be delivered from such a Godless eternity. But St. Peter (Acts 2:27) refers to this text, seeing it as a prophetic statement about the Son of David, Jesus.

**I Peter 1:3-9** is a blessing given by Peter to those who are readers of this letter – the church or churches for whom it is intended. That blessing divides into two parts: first, the foundation of hope upon which the life, work and witness of this Christian community is built (vss. 3-5); and second, the Christian view of time which provides the context for that hope (vss. 6-9).

Peter begins by offering God’s blessings to this congregation. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1:3-5).

The blessing God gives to the church is “a new birth into a living hope”. Both as individuals and as a community, Christ is constantly being born afresh in them, thus giving to their lives and to their life together a future and a hope. That hope is centered in “the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead”. Because Christ lives, because we are chosen by Christ and because we embrace

and believe in that One who is still alive, we inherit a future and a hope. And that hope is “imperishable, undefiled and unfading”, a hope that is protected by God and is guaranteed to us through the work of salvation God is doing in our lives and in our midst right now and into eternity.

Having placed our hope in the perspective of time and eternity, Peter then goes on to state more particularly the Christian understanding of time. Time is not ceaseless, a cycle that repeats itself continuously as the seasons of nature repeat themselves continually. This was the understanding of time to which most pagan cultures (including Rome) held. Nor is time the march of events, each event leading to the next event without any cause, rhythm or consequence about them (an understanding of history held by some Greeks and Jews). Rather, time is meaning.

Time is full of meaning. All that happened in Israel and even in the Gentile world before the coming of Christ happened as prologue and preparation for Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. Likewise, the future is secure for Christians because our eternal relationship with God is guaranteed through the cross and resurrection of Christ. That is the hope in which all Christians live. Consequently, because our future as the Church is guaranteed and our past was preparatory for Christ’s coming, then the only thing that matters is the present. If the present demands of us suffering, harassment and persecution from an unbelieving Gentile world, we can cope with that suffering because of the hope we have been given through Christ’s resurrection (which is a foretaste of our resurrection).

Thus, Peter writes, “In this you rejoice, even if now for a little while you have had to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith – being more precious than gold that, though perishable, is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (vss. 6-7). Since the past was prologue to the coming of Christ and the future is our hope we have in oneness with him in heaven, then the present is whatever life deals to us and how we choose to live our lives in the light of what is dealt to us. If the hand dealt to us is one of suffering or persecution or alienation from a culture that perceives justice, equity and love as being expressions of powerlessness and unacceptable priorities, then so be it! God will use such persecution or suffering to refine us as gold is refined in the fire, so that we may be even more like the person of Christ, able to cry out “Thy will be done” even in the midst of the cross. And that suffering may also have a profound impact on those who are either causing the suffering or who are observing it, bringing them to an embrace of the shalom kingdom of justice, equity and love, as well.

Peter then concludes his blessing. “Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (vss. 8-9).

Peter harkens back to Jesus’ statement to Thomas in our Gospel lesson for today, when he said to that disciple, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe” (John 20:29). Peter has now lived long enough and traveled far enough that those who are now coming to embrace Christ no longer consist of people who met Jesus while he was ministering in Galilee and Judea. Those responding to Christ are no

longer those who saw Jesus crucified and beheld him as the resurrected Lord. They never have seen him; they never listened to him teach or watched his making of people whole or witnessed him agitating the political and religious leaders of his day. But they still believe in him. They still embrace him as their Caesar (savior) and Monarch (lord). Therefore, they are particularly blessed, because they can believe without seeing, embrace without tangible proof of the Man. And therefore they can experience the most “indescribable and glorious joy” for they have received “the outcome of their faith – the salvation of their souls”. This transformation of the person’s beliefs and actions and life, this transformation of his world is the inevitable result of living by hope during that in-between time of the past and the future, and thus living by faith even in a world of persecution, alienation and of values thoroughly foreign to the kingdom of God!

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