

Second Sunday in Eastertide

John 20:19-31; Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150; Acts 5:27-32; Revelation 1:4-8

John 20:19-31 is the story of how Jesus' disciples embraced the reality of a risen Christ and the implications of that resurrection upon them and the future of the church. But that embrace did not begin so auspiciously.

The text begins, "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 Jews, Jesus came and stood among them" (20:19a). The damning words, "the doors were locked for fear of the Jews", tell us that the disciples' fearful conduct indicates that they have not taken Mary's report of Jesus' resurrection (20:18) seriously. They didn't believe her! And because they didn't believe her, they still live in "fear of the Judeans" (the actual Greek word used here; i.e. the Jewish political, economic and religious establishment that had seemingly eliminated Jesus).

But suddenly, Jesus appears in their midst. Unrestrained by death and by locked doors, the resurrected Christ stands among them and says, "Peace be with you" (20:19b)! This, of course, is not simply a greeting. Jesus is blessing them with shalom – with God's intentions for all humanity, the intentions of vital relationship with God, political justice and equitable distribution of wealth. In his act of blessing his community with shalom, Jesus fulfills his promise to them that he will give them the gift of peace (see 14:27).

Of course, the disciples are stunned beyond belief! Jesus, knowing their incredulity and disbelief, shows them his hands and feet still bearing the scars of the nails, so that they would know that what they were viewing was the resurrected Christ, not a vision nor a spirit (vs. 20).

But Jesus wastes no time in reflecting on his resurrection. Rather he moves immediately to make two demands of them. First, "as the Father has sent me, so I send you" (vs. 21). They are to go out into the world with the good news of Jesus' resurrection, for God has sent them.

Second, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (vs. 23). This responsibility of the Christian community is to forgive each other. To forgive sins is the Spirit-empowered mission of the church. By assuming that responsibility, the Christian community continues Jesus' work of making God known in the world and thus bringing the world to decision and (if that decision is avoided or rejected) judgment (cf. 3:19-21; 15:22-24; 16:8-11).

In between these two commands, Jesus performs a most important act. "Jesus breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit' (20:23). Jesus provides his disciples with the power that they need in order to remain a community committed to him, and to fulfill the twin commissions of bringing Christ's new community to the world and forgiveness or retention of sins. He fills them with the Holy Spirit. In doing so, he fulfills his second promise to them – the promise of providing them a Paraclete or Spirit to take his place (cf. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15).

The scene then shifts. One of the disciples, Thomas, was not present when the resurrected Jesus met with the disciples. They, of course, enthusiastically tell him of their experience with the

same identical words with which Mary told them (20:24; 20:18). “We have seen the Lord!” But like Mary, the disciples’ testimony is dismissed and rejected as well. Thomas is no different than they have been!

Thomas incredulously responds, “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” (vs. 25). But Jesus is going to take Thomas at his word!

The following Sabbath, Jesus appears to Thomas, who is now with the believing disciples (vs. 26). Confronting him directly, Jesus invites Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (vs. 27). Note what Jesus does here. He takes each of Thomas’ demands, and answers them one-by-one. He doesn’t depend upon his physical presence to convince Thomas, but instead lovingly confronts Thomas on each of his demands, answering them – and thus, both acknowledging and giving credibility to those demands.

Thus, Jesus faces Thomas’ doubts head-on, and provides the means for him to deal with them. It is upon such direct confrontation, forgiveness and call that the Christian community is built!

The church has labeled this story “Doubting Thomas”. That is a misnamed story. It is not so much about a doubting Thomas as it is about a graceful Jesus. Jesus’ love for Thomas is so great that he legitimizes what one should recognize are reasonable doubts (you or I would have likely said the same thing as did Thomas), and then graciously meets those demands point by point. This story is about the abundant grace of Jesus that desires nothing more than moving every person and all society toward faith!

And that is exactly the response Jesus receives. “Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God’” (vs. 28)! In one magnificent moment, Thomas moves from doubt to what is the most powerful and theologically discerning confession in the Gospel. In this confession, the Gospel of John reaches its theological apex, as it boldly proclaims that Jesus is, indeed, Lord and God of the “cosmos”, the world, the political, economic and religious systems of the world, and of each individual – whether they acknowledge that lordship or not!

Once testimony has been given to the fact that Jesus is indeed “Lord and Christ”, this chapter (and perhaps the entire book¹) moves to its conclusion: There is much that Jesus did in his ministry, the text implies, that are not included in this book – not because they are not important stories, teachings and events, but because they do not serve the purpose of the book. This book’s purpose is very specific and clear, the author states. “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” (vs. 31)! That is the purpose of the book of John – to present us with a countercultural Christ, controlling the forces of nature and history, confronting the Jewish and Roman systems and calling them to accountability, building his community of faith that would

¹ A number of biblical scholars contend that the book of John originally ended at 20:31, and that the author (or another author) later appended two additional stories to make clear the mission of the beloved community and to resolve what happened to Peter. Other biblical scholars contend that chapter 21 was always part of the Johannine manuscript, and that the book was designed to be completed at 21:25.

pose a viable alternative to societies that had become possessed by greed, unilateral power and lust for control, even orchestrating his own death and then being raised from the dead to lead his covenant community into the world to transform it – a Jesus who was, indeed, “my Lord and my God”!

Psalm 118:14-29. (See the First Sunday in Eastertide [Easter Day])

Psalm 150 is a fitting close to the book of Psalms, for it is a hymn that simply praises God and in so doing, recites no benefits nor asks for anything in return for that praise. It is simply pure, enthusiastic, unadulterated praise – in every sense, simply a “happening”!

“Praise the Lord! Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty firmament. Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his surpassing greatness! Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp! Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! Praise him with clanging cymbals; praise him with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord” (150:1-6)!

It is fitting that the collection of psalms found in the Bible end with the words, “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!” That is so much what the psalms are about – both praising Yahweh and encouraging “everything that breathes” to praise God. Intriguingly, this psalm teaches that musical instruments praise God, but elsewhere it suggests that both wild and domestic animals, the fish of the sea and the birds of the air praise God simply by being who they are. The very earth itself – mountains, hills, plains, valleys praise God – and so does the entire universe. It is the very grandeur in what they are, observed in awe by humans, that elicits such praise.

But the most important creation to offer praise to God is ourselves – humanity. All of humanity is to share in the ecstatic worship of God. We know this is the intentions of this psalmist because of the instruments named. This psalm is not meant to catalog the musical instruments of Israel. Rather, the instruments named are to be used by exclusive groups of people. For example, the tambourine and dance was exclusively a woman’s activity (cf. Exod. 15:20; I Sam. 18:6-7; Ps. 68:25; Jer. 31:4); thus, both women and men are to actively participate in the worship of God. Likewise, praise is both the appropriate response by both lay people and the clergy; again, we know that is so because of the inclusion of the instruments of lute and harp, played exclusively by the Levite priests (cf. II Chr. 5:12-13). Such praise includes alien nations and foreign “strangers” living in Israel because they are part of the “everything that breathes”, as are animals and all creatures. Thus, by the naming of the instruments, the author is telling us that all humanity – whether clergy or lay people, whether men or women, whether a Hebrew or an alien, and presumably whether children or adults, are to live their lives giving praise to God. “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!”

Thus, this final psalm concentrates upon the praise of God by humankind! This is praise for its own sake – not for what we can get out of it, how we can benefit or even in gratitude for what God has done for us. This is praise that clearly proclaims, “It’s not about you, people”! This is

captured most profoundly in this psalm by the Hebrew word translated “firmament” (vs. 1). The Hebrew word *raqia* actually means “dome”. Thus the Psalmist is declaring, “Let everything that lies below the ‘dome of heaven’ praise God”. In other words, let all of life, everything on earth and in the heavens, lift its voice in praising God!

“Praise the Lord!” Thus ends the Psalms!

Acts 5:27-32 is an extremely nuanced passage on power, and as such, is quite revelatory about the respective priorities and machinations of the political/economic/religious powers of Israel and of those who confess Jesus as Lord.

For us to see the full power of this passage, we must pay attention to what immediately precedes it and sets the stage for it (5:17-26). In this earlier passage, the high priest and the Sanhedrin (the governing body that represented Israel’s political, economic and religious systems) have the apostles arrested and thrown into prison. But that night, an angel releases them from prison. The next morning, Peter and the apostles go to the Temple, where they begin teaching publicly about Jesus.

Meanwhile, the Sanhedrin sits for trial of the apostles, and the high priest sends for them to be brought forth from prison. But the guards return with the news that they are not there! Then, a person reports that they are teaching in the temple. The high priest sends for them and they are brought before the Sanhedrin.

It is important to keep in mind that this Sanhedrin is the same identical governing body that had earlier condemned Jesus to death. Their reason for having Jesus killed was that they saw Jesus as a threat to their political dominance, economic exploitation and religious control of Israel, for he had been preaching both compassion for the poor and a return of the nation (and its systems) to the Deuteronomic standards of political justice, equitable sharing of wealth and religion as relationship that was encapsulated in the Jubilee.

The high priest and the Sanhedrin had thought that, by having Jesus killed, they would have rid themselves of this meddling rebel who had so upset the status quo (which operated for the rulers’ benefit). They thought his death would put an end to the threat Jesus posed. But now, here were his followers not only continuing to proclaim and act out his message of social liberation and personal salvation, but they were also proclaiming that this Jesus had risen from the dead! To acknowledge his resurrection, therefore, would be for one to declare that Jesus was right (for his resurrection could only occur by the intervention of God) and that the high priest and Sanhedrin had been wrong in what they had done in getting Jesus killed. Further, it would affirm Jesus’ message about them as leaders who were unfaithful to God’s intentions for Israel and therefore corrupters of Israel, unworthy to be its leaders. Consequently, these apostles had to be stopped. So they were arrested, with the intentions of bringing them to a speedy trial and quick death.

But now, here they were, freed from prison – delivered, they said, by an angel. And rather than fleeing and seeking to escape, these apostles appeared in the Temple, continuing to teach about Jesus. It was the most public and flagrant rebuke and even humiliation of the Sanhedrin!

The Sanhedrin responded quickly. They had the apostles re-arrested and brought before them. And thus begins the lesson from Jesus' followers for the Second Sunday of Easter.

“When they had brought them, 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”” (5:27-32).

“You are determined to bring this man’s blood on us”. Well, duh! If the shoe fits, wear it!

The high priest is being quite transparent here – even in spite of himself. The political, economic and religious powers of Israel were growing increasingly uncomfortable with the proclamation of Jesus, because he was exposing them for what they really were – a cabal of the politically, economically and religiously powerful exploiting the people for personal gain, maintaining themselves in power and covering over all of it with lots of religious talk! And Jesus' exposure of them was weakening their hold on Israel. So they eliminated him, and thought that would put an end to the matter. But now his followers, believing that he had been raised from the dead by God, were re-energized and were now proclaiming Jesus' victory over them, further weakening their position. And even worse, as part of their proclamation, these apostles were exposing the real motives of these rulers of Israel in having Jesus killed so that they were “bringing this man’s blood on us”. Well, that was precisely where it belonged! The systems needed to be held accountable for what they had done, and people needed to see the injustice and the unilateral use of power of which their supposed leaders were capable.

The high priest hoped that by leveling with the apostles, these two “power groups” would come to a mutually agreeable position. But his attempt at damage control miserably fails. Rather than negotiating with the powers that be, Peter directly confronts them and comes implacably against them.

“We must obey God rather than any human authority”. The apostles are not going to cooperate with the Sanhedrin and high priest – or, implied, with Rome either. They are going to “obey God”. They embrace the kingdom of God of justice, equitable sharing of wealth and relational faith that God intended for all Israel, and they will not budge from it for any human authority – no matter how powerful or dominating it might be. Peter serves warning on the high priest. There will be no compromise. There will be no concession. Like Jesus, we will tell it like it is! And you cannot intimidate or threaten or frighten us into any other response.

With these words from Peter, the persecution of the Early Church by the Jewish (and later, the Roman) authorities becomes inevitable. The line has been drawn in the sand. From now on, the only objective of the Jewish political and religious powers (and, later, of Rome) is to annihilate the Christians just as they think they have annihilated the Christ.

But there is one fatal flaw in the thinking of those leaders. They see the apostles' claim of Jesus' resurrection as a ploy to galvanize his followers, to rebuild his movement and to continue his momentum of building the kingdom. But what if it were no ploy? What if it were true? That possibility never occurs to them!

What if Jesus' resurrection was true? "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" (5:30-31).

You leaders of Israel killed Jesus. But God – the God of your ancestors (but not your God) raised Jesus from the dead and restored him back to life! Not only that, but "God exalted him at his right hand" so that Jesus "might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins". That is an extraordinary statement, for what Peter had just said must have left the Sanhedrin breathless with shock and rage. For Peter to claim that God had "exalted Jesus at his right hand" was for the apostle to say that God had made Jesus co-regent of the kingdom of God (which the Jewish leaders perceived as being Israel). You high priest, liturgical priests, Pharisees, Sadducees – you are not God's authority on earth; Jesus is! You don't speak for God; Jesus does! You don't rule on God's behalf; Jesus does! You were wrong in killing Jesus; his blood deserves to be on you. You killed the co-regent of God's kingdom, the one appointed to rule on God's behalf.

But Peter even goes further. The reason God has made the crucified Jesus the ruler "at his right hand" is so that Jesus "might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins". Jesus' death that you brought about provides the means by which Israel (and implied, the whole world) can experience repentance and forgiveness of sins!

But only God can forgive sins! Precisely. That's the whole point. So it was that the Sanhedrin listened in shock and awe at Peter's words, and realized that Peter was making this resurrected Jesus equal to God – not a Godly person, not Godlike, but God Himself – God incarnate! They must have been apoplectic!

"And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him" (vs. 31). It is we apostles – Peter and Andrew and James and John, Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James – who are the authentic witnesses to what God has accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We are the ones who saw him alive again, and who now recognize who he is after all – God of very God! It is not you supposed leaders of Israel who discern what God is about; your eyes are darkened because it was more important to you to maintain your power, slack your greed and build your wealth, dominating everyone than it was for you to perceive what God was doing.

So, Peter is declaring, the high priest and his Sanhedrin, the Pharisees and Sadducees and priesthood are out! And the apostles and the women disciples are in, as far as God is concerned! So persecute us all you like. You have already lost, precisely because "this man's blood is on you" and you won't recognize it or admit it or confess it or repent of it. And those who embrace Jesus and Jesus' kingdom have already won and will continue to win, as God works through them to bring humanity to God's intentions for the entire world.

Revelation 1:4-8 is the second part of the introduction to this prophetic book. The first part of the introduction (1:1-3) makes it clear that the author intends for this book to be read aloud to the church that has received the manuscript (“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy” vs. 3), probably at their standard time of worship. The second part of the introduction – our epistle lesson for today – places the entire book in the form of a letter, for it is an adapted format for the introduction of a letter. By placing the prophecy in the format of a letter, the author expects it to be read as a real letter – that is, to be read out loud (all letters were read out loud because no one read silently at that time in history, and the assumption was that it was read out loud to whomever the letter was addressed – in this case “the seven churches that are in Asia” 1:4). By the way, if you read Revelation from start to finish out loud and in one sitting, you will see that it has an inner coherence and a distinct pattern that you don’t pick up when one studies it silently and by chapters (the chapter divisions were a later addition to the text).

Revelation 1:4-8 follows the standard Roman form for the introduction to a letter. That form consists of identification from whom the letter is sent, identification to whom the letter is written, and a statement of thanksgiving, blessing or praise for the recipient.

“John to the seven churches that are in Asia (vs. 4a). This letter has been written by “John” (who is never clearly identified in the letter; cases have been made by many in the church to identify this “John”). It is being written to “the seven churches that are in Asia”. Those seven churches are later identified in the letter (Rev. 2:1-3:22). “Asia” is not the continent we now know by that name, but rather a Roman province occupying what is today Turkey.

Then comes a rather intriguing blessing for these seven churches. “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” (vss. 4b-5a).

“Grace” – that is, the redemptive and liberating love of God – and “peace” (i.e., shalom) is wished upon the churches and upon those reading the letter. That “grace” and “peace” comes from God the Father (“him who is and who was and who is to come”), from Jesus Christ (“the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth”) and from the Holy Spirit (“the seven spirits² who are before the throne”). This is therefore an early Trinitarian formula. John is also stating that the origin of grace and peace is from the Trinity – God the Father (“him who is and was and is to come), the Son (1:5) and the Spirit (1:4b). So it is not so much that John is writing this letter to those who are reading it, but that it has its origins in the Trinitarian God!

John then concludes his introductory greeting with a magnificent doxology that takes the place of a “thanksgiving” in a conventional letter.

² The Holy Spirit is sometimes described or nuanced in seven ways (7 being the Jewish number of completion), a theme that is repeated often throughout the book of Revelation. That is, when the author refers to the “seven spirits”, he does not mean by that seven distinct spirits but seven nuances or manifestations of one spirit – the Holy Spirit (cf. Rev. 4:5; Zech. 4:2-6; II Cor. 13:14; I Pet. 1:1-2).

“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. The Lord God says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty”” (vss. 5b-8).

This doxology is simply packed with a rich plethora of images and meanings. We learn from it that Jesus “loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood”; it was his death and resurrection that has liberated us from both our personal enslavement to our own sinful nature and our dominance by the world systems (Rome, Judaism) that previously controlled us (the Greek word translated “freed us” is normally only used for slaves, so it has within it the sense both of personal deliverance and of societal liberation).

But Jesus has done more than to love us and to free us from our sins. The doxology goes on to state that he has “made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father” (vs. 6). Israel was at one time called to be a “kingdom of priests” (Exod. 19:6). But now that kingdom has been extended throughout the world to any who have bowed the knee to him. To be a priest is to be one who stands between God and the people, bringing the people to God and God to the people. Therefore, John is telling us that we have been saved to serve, that Christ’s work of redemption and liberation in our lives is not solely to set us free but to engage us in the world as “Christ-ones” (the actual meaning of the word, “Christian”), working for the world’s transformation into the kingdom of God.

John then goes on to proclaim that Jesus will return to earth, “and every eye will see him”, either to rejoice in our oneness with him or the ways we have chosen to live both our individual lives and our national, economic and corporate lives rejecting his grace and peace.

John’s doxology then ends with God Himself speaking. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). The “alpha”, of course, is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, and the “omega” is the final letter. Thus, John is declaring, God is the Creator of all of life (the first) and God is the one who will bring in the New Heaven and a New Earth (a primary theme of the remainder of the book of Revelation). Therefore, he is the last. He is not simply the creator of the beginning and the end. He *is* the beginning and the end. He encompasses all of life, all of nature, all of history, all of the cosmos. Before him there was nothing, and after him there will be nothing (Gen. 1:1-2).

God, John is declaring in this magnificent doxology, is the One “who was and is and who is to come”. He is truly “the Almighty”! That is the mighty God who has acted in Jesus of Nazareth to “free us from our sins” and to demonstrate to us how much he “loves us”. And this is the mighty God we serve as “a kingdom of priests”. So, John implies, don’t spend all your time speculating about how the end is going to happen (Acts 1:10-11). Instead, get out there in the world of your seven cities, to work for the transformation of that city’s people and their political, economic and religious systems, and to confront the “angel” of that city and church (Acts 2-3) – the interior spirituality that shapes both what your city and church is and how it treats people.

This is the great doxology with which John begins his amazing book. But a doxology is a doxology; it is neither a polemic nor an instruction book. A doxology is a liturgical form for the praise of God. The focus of a doxology is on praise, not on speculation or instruction.

John intended his book to be more a vehicle for the worship of God than either an instruction book on the progression of the end times or a horror book to frighten the pagans into converting to Christianity. It was written in order to remind us Christians of the mighty God we serve, to prompt us to remember that as history began in God so it will end in God, and that our task is to simply “keep on keeping on” as we seek to faithfully serve God by serving people around us and by working for the transformation of our society into an approximation of God’s kingdom.

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