

April 19, 2009
The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
John 20:19-23
Life, Not Death

Today's gospel lesson is from John chapter 20, verses 19-23. But before I read that, I need to read you something from John chapter 14. In John 14, Jesus is talking with his disciples at the Last Supper. At one point, Jesus says to them, "*Truly I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do, and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*" A bit later he makes this promise: "*In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live...I have said these things to you while I am still with you. But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything...Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled; do not let them be afraid.*" (Jn 14:12, 19, 25-27) Jesus tells his disciples 1) that they will do the same works he has done, 2) that the Holy Spirit will be given to them, and 3) then offers them words of comfort and peace. Now listen to today's gospel lesson from John 20.

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 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 them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (Jn 20:19-23) This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

Easter is about resurrection, about life after death – or better yet, life defeating death. But as the comparison of the two scripture passages reminds us, Easter resurrection is also about keeping promises. Jesus promised his disciples that they would see him again. He promised them they would receive the Holy Spirit. He promised them a peace different from the peace the world offers. And he kept each of those promises. Obviously the main focus of Easter is the witness to Jesus' resurrection from the grave. But nothing I can say about the risen Christ will make an impact upon you unless you believe that Jesus is trustworthy – that he is someone who keeps his promises, who keeps his word even when we erect barriers that make it hard for him to do just that.

It doesn't appear that the early disciples believed Jesus would keep all his promises. Here's a bit of irony: The disciples had been told by Mary Magdalene that Jesus was not in the tomb where they'd laid him on Friday; so what was the disciples' immediate response? They hid behind locked doors in their own sealed-up tomb. Jesus was alive, yet they huddled together in cramped quarters deathly afraid. They couldn't have been more paralyzed if they'd been wrapped up in burial cloths.¹ Yet into their tomb, Jesus the risen Christ came. He kept his promises in spite of their doubt and fear.

Let me be quite clear. The resurrection of Christ was not a passive act. Christ, the risen Lord, intervened dramatically in the lives of his followers. He made himself known to the

frightened disciples, breathing the Holy Spirit upon them before commissioning them to go out into the world.² After giving the gift of the Holy Spirit, Jesus says emphatically, “As God has sent me, so now I send you.” Resurrection was not the end of the story; it was only the beginning of the real story – a story entrusted to the disciples and now to us. But before this goes any further: Can you trust that all this happened and believe that Jesus is trustworthy, that he keeps his promises?

That’s the pivotal question. When the crucified one appeared on Easter as a resurrected Savior, the disciples each had to make a choice: to accept this or not, to choose life or choose death. It’s a choice that has been set before people throughout the ages. Moses and the Israelites stood on the watery shore with Pharaoh’s army fast approaching. As the waves parted, someone had to take the first step, choosing life over death. When Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel in Shechem, he reminded them that God had kept the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Then he boldly said, “*Choose this day whom you will serve,...but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord.*” (Josh 24:15) The tribes chose life over death. Even poor old Lazarus, bless his soul, was wrapped up in a tomb for over three days when Jesus called out to the dead man to come forth. Lazarus could have rolled over and said, “Just let me sleep 10 minutes more.” But instead he chose life, not death.

Jesus still appears behind locked doors right here in our midst, in those places where we are most afraid. Whether we’ve locked the doors because of threats from outside or out of shame felt within, Jesus is not deterred. Jesus appears and asks us to choose life over death. This is not an altar call sermon. I’m not looking for you to shout up at me, “Yes, preacher, I will choose the risen Christ. I choose life.” I need you to be sure you trust this Jesus; that you believe he keeps his promises. Because life, in all its God-given richness and God-intended responsibility, is something far bigger than you think.

To choose life is to believe something about life after death. It is to believe that the experiences of this life - the sights and sounds, actions and possibilities of this life - are not the full expression of what exists. Resurrection points to a time of completion of what has been begun during our living years. Resurrection offers something richer, deeper, more whole and holy than what we’ve experienced in the here and now. To say more than that is to lapse into pious speculation. Life after death is something we accept by faith and accept because Jesus is trustworthy. Can you believe that?

To choose life is also to believe something about life before death. When Jesus appeared to the disciples in that closed room, it was transformative. The church was born and in the same moment received its very reason for being.³ The disciples saw everything now in a new light and were sent out of the locked room to reflect that light into a shadowy, fearful world. As disciples we believe there’s life before death. This means that, by grace, we are healed; we are forgiven; we are able to stay sober and clean, able to step away from places of abuse, able to end “lives of quiet desperation” and begin new lives of faith, hope, courage, physical and spiritual health. Can you trust that, with Christ, this is possible? Can you believe that?

Hardest of all, to choose life is to believe something about life in spite of death. Joan Chittister is a modern prophet, especially on the topic of women and war. We routinely use sanitized language when talking about war. We speak politely about soldiers and casualties in battle, the tragic losses from “friendly fire” and the unfortunate deaths of civilian “non-combatants.” But Sr. Joan offers an unsettling statistic. She suggests that prior to the turn of the 20th century, civilian casualties accounted for only 5% of the war dead. But by World War II, with its aerial bombing campaigns, civilians were 65% of the war victims. And that during the previous decade and on to today, with the past fighting in Serbia, the genocide in Darfur, and the wars with suicide bombers in Iraq, over 90% of those killed in recent wars were civilians. If in Iraq and Afghanistan there are 14 deaths for every U.S. soldier killed, then over 93% of the total casualties today are civilians.⁴

According to former U.N. Security General Kofi Annan, women and young girls suffer the impact of war disproportionately, for they are targeted to humiliate the men of the society, to break down their resistance and to achieve ethnic cleansing. As Sr. Joan puts it, Women are booty of war, their bodies are instruments of war, their children fodder of war, their homes rubble of war, and their daily struggles one of the horrors of war. They are the victims when villages are burnt, when warriors go on raping rampages, when water supplies are fouled and poisoned, and when nothing is left for them to care for their own sons and daughters. Their suffering is never factored in when generals and politicians determine whether to go to war or not; their losses are never redressed by peace treaties negotiated by men around tables. So much for the notion that men spare women the suffering of war.

To choose life is to correct the language around war so that its true cost, especially for women and all civilians, is included in every general’s calculations. To choose life is to insist that AK-47s belong in no American citizen’s hands. They are not hunting weapons, but weapons designed solely to kill people, such as the three police officers recently added to the long list of victims sacrificed to our nation’s unholy fixation on personal firepower. To choose life is to stop the flow of weapons we send south of the border, and to provide treatment for drug users instead of paying for pointless incarceration, thereby ending the billion dollar plague of narcotics and violence that is sapping the vitality of both America and Mexico. To choose life is to insist that health care is a fundamental right for any civilized society, and not a market-driven commodity to be rationed out only to those who can pay for services that generate profits for those who dispense it.

Behind our locked doors has come the risen Christ, keeping promises he made to all of us. He tells us about life after death, asking us to behold his scars, yet know that love is stronger than nails and spears. He tells about life before death, forgiving us for our denials, betrayals, and fragile spirits kept hidden in locked rooms, even as he breathes upon us a holy spirit and then sends us out to be about the forgiveness business just like he was. And he tells us about life in spite of death – about how violence is to be no more; war is obsolete; earthly power is only a mirage; while hope is real and as tangible as the risen Savior standing before us and offering us life now and life forever.

Can you believe this? More importantly, can you trust this? Start there – for trust is the foundation of life. Dare to hear again the promises Jesus made, as recorded in John 14. Dare to listen again to the fulfillment of those promises by the resurrected Lord, as recorded in John 20. And dare to trust that Easter is for you, through the incredibly expansive vision and joy as recorded in the very last verses of John’s gospel, where it says: *We know that [this] is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.* Thanks be to God!

AMEN

¹ Cf. Margaret Guenther, “Mediated Through the Flesh”, *Christian Century*, April 12, 1995.

² Cf. Texts for Preaching Year B: Second Sunday of Easter, John 20:19-31, p. 284.

³ Ibid., p. 284.

⁴ Cf. Sister Joan Chittister, “Women, Power & Peace,” keynote speech given at the 3rd Annual Women & Power Conference, September 2004.