

April 28, 2019

TEXT: Acts 5:27–39

TITLE: A Change of Heart

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Easter is fundamentally about change. By faith we profess that Jesus Christ was dead and then was resurrected to new life. That's the dramatic change at the heart of Easter. But the ripple effect from that Easter transformation is also all about change—changes in what you believe, changes in how you understand life, changes in how you decide to live from that moment onward. Think about it—Jesus moved from death to life: the first act of change. Then the women came to the tomb expecting to finish the ritual burial preparations, when they found the stone rolled away—and, in the case of Mary Magdalene, actually saw and spoke with the risen Christ. That is a second order of change: change in expectations and beliefs prompted by personal experience. Then the women told the disciples. This is a third order of change: changing from sadness and doubt to joy and faith based on the testimony of those you trust. Over the centuries, this is how the Christian faith has been spread—by the testimony of the written scriptures, testimony about their faith from people we trust, and the conviction in our own hearts that this gospel message is true. All these things taken together change us. They change us from skeptics to believers, from unsure and doubtful to confident and hopeful. Like in the words from the hymn “Amazing Grace,” I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see.”

Now, you and I know that faith is not a light switch you simply turn on and all your doubts forever vanish. The change from doubt to belief does not mean we never ask questions again. That is part of the reason why we love the story of Doubting Thomas so much. There was a “first order” change: Jesus was raised from the dead. There was a “second order” change: Jesus appeared in the midst of the disciples and they believed that he had risen from the grave. There was a “third order” change: The disciples start sharing the news with Thomas that Jesus is alive. How did he react? Thomas said, “*No fair. I want to experience what you experienced. I need to see Jesus and feel the actual wounds in his hands. I need a “second order” encounter with the risen Christ, not just your “third order” testimony.*” So, one week later at the next Sunday gathering of these disciples, Thomas got his wish. Jesus appeared and offered to let Thomas literally feel the marks left by the nails of crucifixion. Now Thomas has a change of heart. Now Thomas believes, to which Jesus adds a comment aimed really at us “third order Christians” today: *Thomas, have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.*

In our lifetimes, we are not able to have “second order” personal experiences of Jesus’ resurrection. We are destined to be people of “third order” faith: people who must trust scripture, trust the testimony of others, and trust our own inner spirit that tells us, yes, Jesus is truly alive. Because of all that, it is important for us not only to remember good ol’ Thomas today, but also to remember good ol’ Gamáriel. He offers us a way to keep our spiritual eyes open (as it were) while also being able to accept the changes our loving, resurrection-offering God has planned for us and for our world.

So who was Gamaliel? Gamaliel was a rabbi and grandson of a very famous Jewish teacher named Hillel. Gamaliel held a position of honor in Jerusalem – he was president of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council. (Sort of like being Chief Justice of the Supreme Court.) He was highly respected as a teacher of the law and a wise counselor for the people. Gamaliel is mentioned in two places in the book of Acts—once he is named as the teacher of the apostle Paul (back when he was a Pharisaic Jew), and once in the passage we heard from Acts 5 when everyone was mad at Peter for preaching about Jesus being resurrected from the dead and Gamaliel advised them to just “hold their horses.” (I’m paraphrasing.)

Gamaliel had seen Jewish reformers and revolutionaries come and go. Maybe this Jesus of Nazareth and his followers were just another “flash in the pan” and would soon fade away. Maybe they were something more substantial. Time would tell. So Gamaliel warned the council, “Leave these Christians alone. If their work is just human folly, it will soon pass away. If not—if it is truly inspired by God, then we don’t want to be on the wrong side of that dogfight.” (I’m paraphrasing again.) Why is that such important advice? Because it opened the door for faithful change. Gamaliel was warning his colleagues not to be too sure of themselves—since humility is a necessary part of all wisdom. Just because you disagree with something does not automatically mean it is totally wrong. In fact, God has been known to do surprising things—unsettling things—even amazing, challenging, miraculous things. Only if you’re open to the idea that God is at work in the world, changing things, stirring things up, can you also be open to letting God bring about real change in your own life.

In the movie and later musical “Sister Act,” there is a clash between two approaches to life—the way of the Mother Superior: a way of tradition, piety, and isolation from the fallen world, as opposed to the way embodied by Deloris: a way of creative exuberance, night clubs, bars, seeking the spotlight on the world’s stage. Initially the head nun fights the innovations Deloris brings to the convent. She is appalled by their Catholic mass being turned into a stage show, even though it brings crowds into the pews and saves their entire convent from being sold to real estate developers. Later, when Deloris is threatened by her old gangster friends and seeks refuge with her friends in the convent, the Mother Superior suddenly sees that all the tradition, all the rituals have no vitality if they don’t lead to real compassion for someone in need. And Deloris recognizes that all the glamour of the stage and pleasures of the world cannot compare to finally belonging—to loving and being loved, honestly, humbly, genuinely. You almost hear wise ol’ Gamaliel in the background: *Remember, ladies: If it’s of the world, it can’t last. But if it’s from God, then don’t be afraid to change.*

What in your life needs to be changed? What part of your day fills you with more stress than satisfaction? When does your spirit come alive and when does it sink like a stone tossed into the muddy Monongahela? I could list off various ways you could right now make changes in your life for the better, but it would sound like a Barnes & Noble self-help book or a lifestyle column from Huffington Post. No, I want you to remember

Easter, remember Gamaliel, remember Thomas, and then think about where God is bringing Easter change into your life.

Remember that Easter is about change—Jesus moving from death to life. Resurrection is both the good news of Easter and the loving plan of God for each of us right now. We too are being called forth from our tombs, called out from our shadows, called into light and new life. That necessarily involves moving in a new direction—giving up what is destroying us, stepping away from sin, bitterness or self-doubt, and moving toward the change God wills for us. How can we trust this is true? Well, remember ol' Gamaliel. There are things in this world that are of God and things that are not of God. Don't assume you always are able to recognize one from the other. Be open to being surprised. Be willing to be wrong. By prayer, patience, by grace, look for how God is at work in the changes happening around you and then step forward by faith.

Does that seem too simplistic, too naïve? Then remember ol' Doubting Thomas. That first Easter, he didn't have the same experience as all his friends. He was angry. He was disappointed. He was stubborn, refusing to believe their "third order" testimony, their descriptions of what he missed. There are often times when we feel the same way—when we feel left out, when we want what others have, when we simply can't believe all this Jesus-talk is true. Just because you and I are like "Thomas" does not mean we lack faith. It's okay to be a Thomas. Thomas named his disappointment and doubt. Thomas risked his friends' disapproval but didn't run away from the group, run away from the church. He knew that he needed others to help him understand his place in God's world. So eight days later he was back in their midst—and then he did see what they'd seen. Then his doubts were eased and his faith revived. He changed. Or rather he understood that Easter is always about change.

One of the biggest myths of life is that you can keep doing things the way you've always done it. Whether you're a church, a business, or just a person who by God's grace woke up this morning, the world tries to tell you that things will always be just the way they are right now. But it's not true. A recession hits, a job is lost, cancer is diagnosed, a divorce or death occurs and we don't know what to do next. Easter is God's way of challenging the world's lies with a "first order" change that ripples through life with real hope and promise for each of us. Every day is a new day—a resurrection day. Easter is about shaking off yesterday and by faith stepping into the opportunity of today and promise of tomorrow. It is about trust, not self-certainty. It is about change, not stagnation. It is about life, not death. It's about God in Jesus Christ, blowing us forward through the Holy Spirit's winds of change. Every day is Easter from now on—thanks be to God!