

2 Easter
April 16, 2023

Sermon by Deacon Steve Seibert

John 20:19-31

*Now the green blade riseth from the buried grain,
Wheat that in the dark earth many days has lain;
Love lives again, that with the dead has been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

*In the grave they laid him, Love whom hate had slain,
Thinking that never he would wake again,
Laid in the earth like grain that sleeps unseen
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

When it was evening on that day...**what day?**

The day of Christ's resurrection. We heard that glorious story last Sunday. Mary Magdalene finds the empty tomb; she **runs** to Simon Peter and (we are pretty sure) John. **They run to the tomb.** Peter sees the linen cloths that had been wrapped around Jesus, lying there. John sees the empty tomb and believes. For the first time they understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Jesus then appears to Mary, not to the two others; she comes to all of the disciples to give them the message, "I have seen the Lord!" She has just seen Christ who had been crucified. He is alive and has spoken to her!

Yet, in this morning's gospel passage, it does not seem as though the needle has moved emotionally at all for the disciples, this small community that includes ten of the disciples and some of the women and men who followed Jesus. Perhaps the group has dismissed Mary's account; yet Simon Peter and John are among those who are hunkered down in fear. Lest I come down too hard on this tattered band of followers, let us think about where they might be, both mentally and spiritually.

Just a few evenings ago, they had shared the Passover meal with Jesus. The beginning was familiar, the holy and sacred rituals and prayers were comforting. The history of salvation for the Jewish nation. But then Jesus spoke of one of them betraying him. What? One of his closest friends and disciples? One of them? Betray him how? By doing what? They had remembered Jesus calling Simon Peter Satan. Telling Peter to get behind him. Was it something like that?

As the evening wore on, Jesus spoke more intimately with them, about how seeing him was the same as seeing the father. He told them how much he loved them. They shared bread and the cup that was the same as they had always done and yet felt completely different. Jesus spoke of sharing the bread and the cup as a way to remember him. The disciples couldn't fathom how, but somehow those simple elements would be Jesus. How could that be? Was the wine they had shared confusing them? What was the truth?

Jesus spoke of going away to a place that they knew, a place they knew how to get to. What did he mean? They were **so glad** when Thomas spoke the question that was on all of their minds., “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?” Jesus had looked into each of their eyes as he said, “I am the Way, the Truth and Life.” Yes, of course, that is what they had felt and believed over the past three years. Jesus was so wise, so intelligent, so loving. And the signs that he did! Water to wine, healings, death to life.

They went out to the beautiful Garden of Gethsemane, a familiar and safe place for them. Yes, Jesus seemed troubled... but the evening was soft and beautiful. A perfect Passover night. And then, everything went to hell in a handbasket.

Temple guards with torches and weapons and there is, no, it cannot be, it’s Judas leading them. So, this is the betrayal of which Jesus spoke. Some of the disciples are close enough to hear Jesus tell the guards to take him but to let them go. And so, they fled from this ugly scene as fast as they could, running for their lives. When someone tried to stop John by grabbing his clothing, he slipped out of it and ran away...**naked**. Word of Jesus trials, torture, whippings and finally his unspeakable death moved like wildfire through this small group of Jesus’ closest friends. Wildfire that burned hope and peace, bringing fear, bringing sadness, bringing guilt. Peter shared his remorse over his denial of even knowing Jesus. At least Peter had tried to defend Jesus with his sword. Still, no one had any heroics to share.

This is the gathered community that is hunkered down that Sunday evening.

*Forth he came at Easter, like the risen grain,
He that for three days in the grave had lain,
Quick from the dead, my risen Lord is seen:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

Jesus stood among them. **“Peace be with you.”** Jesus knows these men and women, knows what they are going through. They could not even process the good news that he sent Mary Magdalene to speak to them. He knows they need peace, and that they need it badly. But they also need to know that he is physically present with them. He shows them his hands and feet, his crucifixion wounds. His body looks different but now they know. They rejoice! Jesus! Jesus, dear Jesus!

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Thank you, Jesus, for still counting us as your friends and disciples. Even though we have failed you, thank you for sending as the Father has sent you. They are beginning to understand that the love of Jesus is not earned. He gives it no matter what. Without conditions.

What about Thomas? The doubting Thomas. A biblical phrase that has been in use since at least medieval times. I like Thomas. When I was a teacher, a couple of lifetimes ago, I always tried to assure my students that they could always ask a question, no matter how dumb it might seem. Because, there was really no such thing as a dumb question. But when I was a student, I would hold back, not wanting to look ignorant.

I can assure you that when Thomas said, “Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?”, he was asking the question that was on all the disciples’ minds. Thank you, Thomas. Thank

you, Thomas, too, for voicing your willingness to go and die with Jesus when he went to Bethany to raise Lazarus from the dead.

Jesus gets Thomas. Thomas simply wants the same experience of seeing Jesus as the other disciples, not their retelling of their encounter with Jesus. I think the literal translation of the Greek to English may help the words of Jesus come across to us more strongly. **Bring the finger of you here and see the hands of me and into the side of me.**

Thomas's response, again in the literal Greek, **"The Lord of me and the God of me!"**

Where do we come in this story, this encounter with Jesus?

Jesus, in responding to Thomas, speaks what has been called the "Last Beatitude". **Have you (I add, like all the other disciples present) believed because you have seen me? *Blessed are those whom have not seen and yet have come to believe.***"

That's Jesus, speaking down through the centuries and through eternity to all of us: Those of us who have died, those of us who are living, and those of us yet to be born. **Blessed are you!**

But, you tell me, I am not qualified to do the work of Jesus. I have a history of failure, of betrayal, of falling short of the mark. And if the truth be told, I have my share of doubts. I don't even like myself a lot of the time. I'm sure Jesus has some better prospects to carry out his work than me.

What did Jesus say to the disciples as they huddled in fear and guilt?

Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

To serve the least in my kingdom.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

To be a voice for the voiceless.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

To love all of God's creation and children, regardless of whether they return your love or not.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

To pass my love on to future generations.

As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

To understand that when all seems lost, God's love springs forth into the world.

*When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
Thy touch can call us back to life again,
Fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been:
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green.*

Amen.