

The Second Sunday of Easter(4-11-21)

Guest Preacher: The Rev. Dr. Kempton Hewitt

I want to say that Fawn joins with me in sending greetings to everyone, and we're recording this up in Edmonds, Washington, but we are feeling here with you. So, let's pause for just a moment of prayer.

Give us eyes to see. And give us ears to hear. We stand in the presence of the Risen Lord. Amen.

Well, you know, this text has an interesting history. There is a kind of a running joke. In all those years when I was in seminary, all of the interns and placement students would come back after Holy Week and say, *well, the pastor only let me preach once this year. And he made me preach on the Sunday after Easter. And it was on this darn text about poor old Thomas*. It was a running joke. And I have, in my visitation of churches and so forth, heard pastors preach a lot of sermons on this text about the so-called Doubting Thomas.

The thing about it is that there are a lot of clues throughout John as to how we really ought to be thinking about this whole thing. The stories actually begin on Easter morning because it's one whole piece, the way this beautiful narrative is created. And it begins with the experience of Mary Magdalene, who is greatly favored in this segment of John's gospel. There is a kind of intimacy there and warmth that has been, throughout history, almost uncomfortable for folks. But it's there. And as she meets the Risen Lord, there is within her a response that is simply a name, Rabbouni!

And then she acts as this angel, because that's the meaning of the Greek word. She becomes the angelic messenger and informs the others. And so, for her, this whole thing about believing is just a matter of the heart, and also for the others who are there at that lengthy, beautiful story account. Peter and the beloved disciple, we get differences there, too. Peter, as usual, is very active and he takes charge and goes in and examines everything and leaves, and nothing is said about his response. But when the so-called beloved disciple and we don't know who that is, but the beloved disciple

goes in and looks in and it says quite plainly, he believed. He didn't even need to see the risen Lord as was given a privilege to Mary Magdalene.

I become very annoyed when I hear, let's face it, the TV preachers reduce the saying of John's understanding of believing to a kind of a mathematical formula. Just pray this sinner's prayer and you're in like Flynn. Nothing could be further from the true character of John's gospel. People struggle with believing. And by the way, I keep saying believing and to believe, because John is pretty unique in this regard. He doesn't like the word faith. It might suggest that it is kind of a possession of human beings like a muscle you can just exercise or not exercise or let atrophy or become athletic in your faith.

And it's not the case in John. He likes the verb "to believe." And it's an action. It's something that happens. And the other thing about John's gospel is that when this happens, it's not the result of something spectacular in a human being. It's a divine gift. It's a meeting. It's an encounter between the human and the divine. And so, people deal with this quite differently and this is very purposeful in John. I mean, this is the gospel that's been polished again and again and again. We don't know how many times, but somebody just didn't sit down and write it and that was it. It's got a lot of polish to it. These stories are carefully crafted.

We can talk about many, but let's just take Nicodemus. When he comes in, he acts totally bewildered in this nighttime dialog with Jesus when he says, I don't get it. What could this mean? And he just kind of dribbles off into the night. Nothing more is said about him until we get to the middle of the book when they're trying to actually kill Jesus, and he is that person of integrity we'd like to see more of in our own life when he says, "Wait a minute. We've got laws. You can't just kill him. But if we're to do this, let's have a process. Where the witnesses?" And then he's dismissed again. And then he shows up at the end totally in surprise. And he shows up with the traditional figure of Joseph of Arimathea. And the two of them go to Pilate. And Pilate colludes with them on the burial. The three of them, these three unlikely characters on the fringes of believing.

Recently we've had this great basketball event called March Madness, and we started using the term, the dance, the dance of March Madness. And in John's Gospel there's a

kind of a dance going on by these different story participants. And it's the dance of believing.

Nicodemus comes and says, I'm going to help with this body, and because night is coming and it has to be taken care of before night, here he is at the edge of daylight helping bury the body. And Pilate helps.

What's going on here? You remember that Pilate commanded he be buried in royal garments, which is where we get this picture of Christus Rex, the Christ on the cross in a royal gown. That was there by his command. And when they came to him and said, *wait a minute, don't write he is King of the Jews in all these languages. Take that down. We want to edit that. Write this, "he claimed..."* And then we have this enormously terse, absolutely gap-filled response of Pilate when he says, *what I have written, I have written.*

And we could go on to dance with the man born blind, the dance of the Samaritan woman, the dance of the man by the pool of Bethesda. It's a dance with many characters, and they all dance differently.

I've heard some doozies of sermons in my life on this text and the ones that do the most harm are the ones that just dumb it right down and say doubt is the enemy of faith. I would call doubt the handmaiden of faith.

At the end of this reading the editor takes the stage and says these are written so that you might keep on believing. Oh, I'm aware of the Greek textual issue but that's the way the best texts, in my opinion, read. Not *unbelievers*, but *you all who have followed this description of all these dance partners with light.*

And one further thing. There is a theme that runs through much of this, and it is fear. It's not accidental. Again, these are polished stories. It's not accidental that this term keeps turning up. They're knocked down. Then they get up. And the next week the doors are closed. And throughout John's gospel the problem with believing is fear, but in a quite particular way. The fear is the fear of living in the light and denying the darkness which is the reality by which all others live. It's the willingness, John says, to grasp the light and pretend as it is the real world. And it's fearful to leave, because that darkness is, as

John describes it, not necessarily a moral sin, but the understandings we have inherited, all of the beliefs that we have come to depend upon. The belief that what's important is to take care of ourselves. The belief that if someone is different then, in fact, they are not a part of God's care. Or the belief that the wisdom we have inherited, the conventional wisdom we've inherited, is the wisdom by which to live. But instead. Jesus, as the incarnate word in John's Gospel comes to share a vision of a different world, the world for which he comes. And having the courage to step into that world is the courage that acts in the face of fear. When that step is taken, then we wake up and we say, *oh, so that's what life is like.*

I'm glad that this text gives me space.

I think, of an incident recorded in the ecumenical history of Europe, the great Dutch scholar, Visser 't Hooft, chair of the World Council of Churches back in the day, someone walked up to him during a project and said, well, are you saved? And he said after only a moment of thought. "Yes, I am saved, and I am being saved and I shall be saved."

And so, I think also with belief and believing in John's gospel, I have believed, I am believing, and I shall, with God's help, believe.

Well, it's a new morning when I'm recording this and the time after Easter is a new morning along with Mary Magdalene and the beloved disciple and Peter and good old Thomas. And if we can emulate them in persisting in believing, then we also have a grasp on life itself. Amen.