

Sermon for Morning Prayer The First Sunday after Easter

The Rev. Warren E. Shaw, Supply Priestⁱ

Lessons:ⁱⁱ

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the forty-third Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.ⁱⁱⁱ

“But now thus saith the LORD that created thee, O Jacob, and he that formed thee, O Israel, Fear not: for I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine. When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee: when thou walkest through the fire, thou shalt not be burned; neither shall the flame kindle upon thee. For I am the LORD thy God, the Holy One of Israel, thy Saviour: I gave Egypt for thy ransom, Ethiopia and Seba for thee. Since thou wast precious in my sight, thou hast been honourable, and I have loved thee: therefore will I give men for thee, and people for thy life. Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him.

“Bring forth the blind people that have eyes, and the deaf that have ears. Let all the nations be gathered together, and let the people be assembled: who among them can declare this, and shew [SHOW] us former things? let them bring forth their witnesses, that they may be justified: or let them hear, and say, It is truth. Ye are my witnesses, saith [SETH] the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen: that ye may know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the Lord; and beside me there is no saviour. I have declared, and have saved, and I have shewed [SHOWD], when there was no strange god among you: therefore ye are my witnesses, saith the Lord, that I am God.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the thirty-sixth Verse of the twenty-fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.^{iv}

“And as they thus spake, Jesus himself stood in the midst of them, and saith [SETH] unto them, Peace be unto you. But they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a spirit. And he said unto them, Why are ye troubled? and why do thoughts arise in your hearts? Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have. And when he had thus spoken, he shewed [SHOWD] them his hands and his feet. And while they yet believed not for joy, and wondered, he said unto them, Have ye here any meat? And they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, and of an honeycomb. And he took it, and did eat before them. And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures, And said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: ““See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.”^v In the Na~~m~~e of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Homily:

Before he left, my predecessor here reminded us of something very important. In his final sermon, he reminded us that this is not and never was his church. It is not our church either, not yours and not mine. It is not even St. Thomas's church, even though it bears his name. This is Christ's church, and He is still here. No matter who else may come and go, Christ will never leave us or forsake us. Those are His very words, and Scott reminded us of that promise last Sunday.

In this morning's Second Lesson, the disciples were having trouble believing that promise. Even when Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to them, they had trouble believing what they were seeing. So Jesus said, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is I myself. Handle me and see."

Some of you may be familiar with the work of a group of Biblical scholars who call themselves "The Jesus Seminar." The working thesis of that group is that the Christ who is known by faith and worshiped in the Church is very different from the man known to history as Jesus. In other words, what the Jesus Seminar is trying to prove is the very opposite of what this morning's Lesson teaches.

In today's Second Lesson, the risen Christ appears to His disciples in His resurrection body. He shows them the wounds inflicted upon him when He was hung on the cross.

In doing that, Jesus is does what Professor Hill in "The Music Man" never did. You will recall that the Music Man was often asked to show his credentials as a musician, but he never did, because he didn't have any. But the risen Christ, without being asked, immediately displays the marks that identify Him as the very same person who walked upon the earth and taught and prophesied and healed and was executed and buried in Jerusalem. The Jesus of history and the Christ of faith whom we worship as risen Savior and Lord of all are one and the same.

Not only that, but the wounds that Jesus displays identify Him as the one who has authority over us. He has earned that authority by sacrificing Himself for us in obedience to God the Father. In St.

Matthew's Gospel, it is only after He has gone to the cross and risen from the dead that Jesus says "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." The thesis of The Jesus Seminar is by no means new. It is in fact an ancient heresy that appeared in the life of the Church even before the New Testament was completed. Such passages as today's Second Lesson may well have been specifically written to counteract it.

The perpetrators of this ancient heresy claim to be able to get behind the testimony of the Gospels and determine what really happened. Usually they blame St. Paul for taking the figure of a simple Galilean peasant and overlaying it with metaphysical material drawn from Greek mythology to create the religion we now know as Christianity. The Gospel, however, makes it clear that the material for understanding and interpreting Jesus comes from Jesus Himself, and He drew it from the Hebrew Scriptures, not from the speculations of Gentile philosophers and poets.

In this Gospel passage, Jesus refers to the things that are written about Himself "in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms." Then, when He had shown Himself and identified Himself convincingly to the Apostles, "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." He showed them how the Savior of the world needed to suffer and to be killed and to rise from the dead. He showed them how His death and resurrection fulfilled the promise to Abraham that all the world would be blessed through him. And He showed the disciples how they were to play a part in that great project and in God's action for mankind.

There are some who have said that the figure of the risen Christ is a mass hallucination, the product of wishful thinking on the part of the disciples. There are others who have said that Jesus's resurrection is a symbolic way of saying that the spirit of Jesus lived on, after His death, in the minds and hearts of His disciples. There are others who say that Jesus is a generic savior, one among many, who represent in a timeless way the cycles of death and rebirth that we observe in nature. But the Gospel will allow for no such notions.

Jesus says, “handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And when the disciples still disbelieved, He asked for something to eat and then ate it in their presence.

This is no hallucination. This is no disembodied spirit. This is the actual historical Jesus, a particular person who lived at a particular time in a particular place with His own unique and personal body. And He said to them, “See my hands and my feet that it is I myself.”

In a Bible study class, someone once asked me why God picked that particular time for Jesus to be born and to die and to rise again. The question touched upon what theologians have called “the scandal of particularity”. We might just as well ask why that man and not some other? Why a man and not a woman? Why the Jews and not some other chosen people? Why that part of the world and not some better place? The answer in every case is what Calvin called “the sovereignty of God”, or to put it quite simply, we do not know.

We might like to have a general kind of savior and a general kind of religion, but that is not what the sovereign God has chosen to give us. God in His sovereignty has given us a religion based in history, which means that He acted through specific times, specific places, and specific people. This, and not another. The God of Israel has chosen to speak to us, not through our imaginations but through our senses, and He has chosen to present Himself to us in the person of this Man whom we call Jesus. As Peter says in Acts, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we may be saved.”

This same Jesus who once walked the hills of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem presents Himself to us right here today in the bread and the wine that we bless and share in His name. He says to us, “This is my body. Take it. Touch it. Taste it. Swallow it. It is I myself.” This same Jesus opens our minds, if we will allow it, to understand the Old Testament Scriptures. It is in the Name of this same Jesus that we are directed to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to every person in every place and every culture. His presence among us is real, and He charges us to be witnesses to that reality.

We are witnesses to the fact that the Christ whom we worship and serve is the same Jesus who walked and talked and died in ancient Israel. We are witnesses to His power over sin and death. We are witnesses to His presence among us this very day. We are witnesses to the fulfillment in Him of the promises to Abraham and Moses and David and Jeremiah. We are witnesses to the indwelling presence of God in this Man to whom we look for salvation and direction, not only here in the Church but in every area of life.

Conclusion:

St. John says in his Epistle, “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands ... that we proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus That is also why you have been baptized in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

To the unbelieving Apostles, Jesus says, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.”

And to us He says, “This is my body. This is my blood. It is I myself.” Take and eat. Take and drink. Then go and bear witness.”

Amen.

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ⁱ *Retired Rector, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Chester, PA.*

ⁱⁱ *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year, THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Isaiah 43:1-12 (KJV).*

^{iv} *Luke 24:36-49 (KJV).*

^v *St. Luke 24:39 (RSV).*