

Year B, Third Sunday of Easter
April 18, 2021
The Reverend Dr. Brent Was

“...in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering...”

Good morning! A blessed third Sunday of Easter to you all.

This is a time of grand transition, and transitions, especially big ones, are so often in fits and starts. The daffodils are up, our spinach starts have set their first true leaves, I have seen a little pink in people’s cheeks from the sun last week and some of us woke up to a dusting of snow yesterday morning. I know it is Maine, but still. Vaccines are flowing into arms (my second shot is due this coming week), a lot of businesses and schools are reopening, I had coffee with someone outside of my immediate household, TWICE (outside and distanced) and infection rates, especially here in Maine, are rising, and among younger and younger people as the variants gain a foothold. We are even transitioning to having a government that actually functions as a government ought to function, making our lives better through collective action and that transition is going about as smoothly as anyone could expect.

We are also in a time of major transition here at St. Francis. Assuming things don’t get worse pandemic-wise, on Whitsunday, Pentecost (May 23) we will open the doors up here on Hinckley Ridge. Between now and then, though, goodness, we have some work to do. Last week we had some technical difficulties. I am sorry about that. We are working hard to make things as seamless as possible, but the transition from me running Mass in Bill’s carriage house all by myself, to now at church with a few folks involved, and learning how to divide up the labor, but only for a few weeks before folks come to church in-person. At that point we’ll need to do it all in another different way, with different technology on a vastly improved, but far from flawless internet system. We are completely committed to making both the continuing at home practice of worship and the transition back to in-person worship are as smooth and edifying as possible. And to do that, we need two things... your honest feedback and your patience. (And if you ever dreamed of being a TV engineer, directing cameras and making sure the show goes on, have I got an opportunity for you)!

Today is the 57th time we have joined together on the Lord’s Day to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Fifty seventh! That is a lot of Sundays together in this way. And I am amazed how well it has gone! Back in October, on the occasion of our 32nd Sunday on-line, I preached on Spiritual Communion and what the real presence of Christ in the sacraments means to those of us subjected by necessity to virtual worship. In that sermon I referenced The Reverend Dr.

Ruth Meyers, the Episcopal church's most prominent liturgical theologian right now. She wrote of the Eucharist in physical distancing times, "We glimpse Christ's presence, getting a taste of the heavenly banquet, yet on this side of the grave we never experience the fullness of that presence. Real absence draws us forward to the time when we shall see God face to face. Real absence makes room for the mystery of God whose presence we can neither compel or control."

Twenty five weeks and six liturgical seasons later, here we are, still at it, but now in the process of transitioning away from that real absence and back towards the real presence of not only Jesus Christ in the actual elements of the Eucharist, but in consecrating them together, being the Body of Christ together in the way we have been accustomed to for the 11 or 35 or 74 or 86 other years we have been going to church. I am thinking about all of this. I am thinking about all of this A LOT, thinking about cameras and video technology, shot glass communion and handwashing stations, requiring vaccines and seating charts and how to deal with hymns and Sunday School and how to communicate all of this to everyone. The vestry, the regathering committee, altar guild, musicians, parents, property committee, flower guild, everyone who has a job here on Sundays is hard at work problem solving and experimenting with how to bring it all home. (That is everyone except the coffee hour folks, sorry Mary, Suzanne and the rest of you! That is on hold for goodness knows how long).

I am talking about all of this today because, first, you all need to know what is going on. A lot of people you go to church with are getting busier and busier. If you are interested, inspired, or simply able, we need technologically competent helpers as I said above. We need ushers and greeters to guide us through seating and Eucharist. The altar guild is on new footing, with all those shot glasses and everything, and always needs help. As do our eucharistic minister and lector ministries. We will need help with our ministry to families, children and youth, particularly if you have outdoor education/activity gifts to share. This regathering process will take all of us.

The second reason this is in the front of my prayers today is that the reading from St. Luke's gospel really got me thinking. They were also in a time of great transition, the disciples, and one far more earth-shattering than what we face. Their rabbi and master and Lord was dead, betrayed by one of their own (who, depending on the telling, came to a gruesome end of his own). They were scattered. On the run. And weird things started to happen.

Mary Magdalene (and again, depending on the telling, others saw strange things at the grave). Last week we heard the story of His second appearance behind the locked door, this one for St. Thomas' benefit. Directly preceding today's pericope, there are the events on the road to Emmaus,

and the stranger who was revealed to be Jesus Himself. Which brings us to today's story, the men on the Emmaus road telling the others what they had seen and Jesus appears to them all. A lot going on. Salvation, making meaning of the salvation of the world was just beginning.

What sticks out for me today, in this story from the turn in the narrative from Passion to Presence, the real presence of Jesus Christ raised from the dead, is one verse, one half verse, actually, Luke 24:40a, "...in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering..."

"...in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering..." If I had a memory verse for this Eastertide, this would be it. I am overjoyed with the wind-down of the pandemic, the rapidity that the vaccine is being administered, the discipline of the people of Maine in keeping up with precautions, the function of our government. Overjoyed with the anticipation of getting to know you all in person! Of celebrating Mass at a table together, like for real together (not that what we are doing doesn't count, but like in our story today, Jesus actually eating the piece of fish, embodiment, real real-ness actually matters).

AND disbelief. I believe, yes, and I need help with my disbelief... that we can do this and safely, that no one will be left behind as we pivot church-ward, that it is worthwhile, all this effort, all these resources so we can gather together.

And there are larger darkneses I am wrestling with, ones I know some of you are too, though most of you are reticent to discuss it with your priest. Where is my faith in this moment? A commentator I listen to had a tornado touch down right outside his office last week. He was ok, but it was devastating to his rural Tennessee town. But I so identified with him when he said, "Someone asked me, "Brother John, were you seeking the Lord when that tornado touched down?" And I said, "To be honest, I was seeking shelter."

Has your faith saved you these past 57 weeks? Think on that for a second. How has it done that? How has your relationship with Jesus Christ helped you through this time, this dark night of our collective souls in the pandemic, racial unrest, economic ruin, police violence, mass shootings and insurrection.

By way of full disclosure, I don't know what I can say about that for myself. This has been a hard time for my faith, for my relationship with God. I know what I think about things, but I am not sure what I believe, that is trust, that is accept into my heart the hows and whys things are the way things are (or ought to be). My faith is feeling a bit murky at times.

Now, I can say without a doubt that the *practice* of my faith *has* saved me. Morning prayer, four days a week (that's 140 times so far), with the same small group of people has saved me. (8:45

Wednesday – Saturday. It is great). Our classes, Sacred Ground, contemplative practice, Benedictine spirituality, catechism. Being here with you each Sunday, as odd and stressful as it has been and will be, has given me reason to engage, has buoyed my spirits with warm, familiar words, has rooted me with common prayer in the fertile soil of God in Christ with the Holy Spirit, even in this time of real absence.

My brain, I must say, the ego-me, has not been succored by God and faith in the way it has been in less difficult times. I thought myself into my faith (or at least I had to remove some intellectual barriers before I could relax into Christianity). That is not holding as well as I hoped, but I also must say, my heart is in it like it has never been before. Like our spiritual ancestors way back at the very beginning of our tradition, I am still wondering. My heart, my spirit is open, wondering, wonder and joy in this heartbreaking season of mortality, and now in this transition from a time of real absence to a time of real and abiding presence.

You might be filled with doubts. Things that used to make sense before the world was turned upside down might not any more. And there might be joy, oddly, seeping in though suffering is rampant right now. And confusion. And wondering. You know, all the things the disciples felt as their world tumbled out of control.

If that is where you have been, or if, upon thinking about it, that is where you find yourself right now, may God bless you and keep you! You are not alone. You actually are in great company, the company of the very first saints of our faith. So as we finish up these last months of isolation, as we prepare to transition into the next manifestation of the Body of Christ in Blue Hill, as we strive to make meaning of the world and our place in it, and discern where the worlds needs and our gifts intersect, be gentle with yourself and those around you. And when your thoughts go dark or just blank, remember that the light of Christ in your heart burns, and burns brighter the darker things get.

I'll end today with the prayer I ended with on our 32nd week of remote worship. It is by Thomas Merton and it stands.

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.

And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone. AMEN