

Work That Enfaiths
I Corinthians 15:50-16:3
John 20:19-29
Second Sunday of Easter, (April 19) 2020
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*I believe and
Interrupt my belief with
Doubt. I doubt and
Interrupt my doubt with belief.*

-Denise Levertov

from “Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus”

Today is traditionally known as “Low Sunday” in all sorts of churches and across several centuries. We call it Low Sunday partly because of the let down in attendance on the Sunday following Easter Sunday (back when we were gathering in worship together).

I’ve preached some pretty “low” Sundays in more than forty years of preaching. I remember the first time I ever preached in a church other than my home church or my college church. I was invited to preach for a small, country church as a college student. It was “high attendance Sunday” in Texas Baptist churches and they were celebrating high attendance with a whopping nine people up one from their normal eight attendees. During my sermon a little boy ran back and forth in the rear of the church swatting wasps with his rolled-up Sunday School book, and two elderly men sat on the front row, one of whom had an “ear horn” (the first time and last time I’ve ever actually seen one in action). After

every few sentences I'd speak, he'd say to his friend beside him, "What did he say?" And his friend would yell into the ear horn, "He said, ..." and he would quote me. I ended up slowing down and giving him time to translate because I learned quickly that I couldn't preach above the shouting of the two elderly men. The other congregants thought nothing of it. I remember that "Low Sunday" for its low attendance but the experience was anything but low.

More often "Low Sunday" is not about low attendance, it is about the gap between the high and exuberant celebration of Easter morning and the rest of the time. There is a theological gap between celebrating the resurrection and living a normal life, a gap between the ultimate high, holy moment and then figuring out how to walk after we come down.

It's here in the Bible. On the first day of the week after Jesus was crucified his friends are hunkered-down in a locked room somewhere in Jerusalem. They are afraid and they have reason to be afraid. There's no guarantee that the same people who organized Jesus' lynching won't now turn their attention to them, his followers, and once and for all put an end to this dangerous foolishness. So, they're hiding and on the first day of the week, after Sabbath, a few of the women venture out to go to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea has buried the body. And what happens next is holy, wonderful confusion. The body is gone. The guards are asleep. The tomb is empty. There is a rumor of angels and Jesus appearing in the garden and on the road. And there is a lot of running back and forth, racing to the tomb and arriving breathlessly to see for themselves that what the women have said is true, then back to the locked room to tell the good news, the fantastic, incredible good news that he is alive, death did not hold him, love has prevailed, goodness and truth and justice are vindicated. Now the meek triumph; the humble

are blessed, the peacemakers, the healers, the little people, the outsiders are now raised up as he is. And so that very day they burst out of that little room in an explosion of joy and devotion and evangelical fervor.

That's what the four gospels say happened—all but the last part. They didn't burst out of that room at all. In fact, one week after Easter they are still there, locked-down and hiding out, wondering what to do next, wondering when all this is going to pass. Not much has happened all week apparently, because there's no mention of any activity. Maybe they had grocery delivery or maybe they did drive-through. Surely, they talked a lot about what happened. What else was there to do? But one week later they're still there. It was, that is to say, the very first Low Sunday. For them the issue is—now what? Some of us have experienced the risen Lord. Most of us know something we didn't know before. Now what? What should we do? What's next?

The first person to think through the meaning of what happened on Easter morning and what it had to do with the rest of life was by the Apostle Paul, our first missionary and our first theologian. Paul wrote a letter to the church in the Greek city of Corinth, a little congregation of Christians in a sophisticated, lively urban center, a cosmopolitan seaport with a library and theater and a huge temple just outside town that employed a thousand sacred prostitutes.

Unfortunately, Paul wrote the letter in response to a church fight and things were getting bad enough that First Baptist Church of Corinth of maybe 30 people were about to split, with maybe ten people going off outside of town, perhaps down the road from the giant pagan temple, and form Temple Heights Baptist Church. So Paul writes, pleading for unity and in the process writes one of the

greatest essays on love anyone ever wrote in chapter 13... “faith, hope and love abide... but the greatest of these is love.”

And then toward the end of the letter he turns to the resurrection. Scholars have devoted enormous attention to the 15th chapter of First Corinthians. It is carefully reasoned, scholarly, sometimes difficult. Paul writes gorgeously and elaborately, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile... But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died... as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.”

And then Paul moves toward a crescendo, “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor. 15:54-57). “Therefore, my beloved, don’t give up, keep up the good work in the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. Now concerning the collection for the saints...” (I Cor. 15:58-16:1).

Since the Geneva Bible in England in the 1550’s, we have had chapter and verse divisions in our English translations. Before that, there were no verses or chapters divided from one another. So, we read Paul here in chapter 15, with his soaring prose and profound theology of the resurrection, and then we stop, naturally, at the end of the chapter. Rarely do we go immediately into the first verse of chapter 16, “Now concerning the collection for the saints...” which is how it would have read in the Greek. No pause between the resurrection and taking up an offering for the saints who were struggling in the church in Jerusalem. For Paul, making this connection is as natural as breathing. One is connected to the other,

one leads to the other – we inhale, and we exhale. We believe the resurrection and we take up an offering for the saints.

I suppose that in my 31 years as pastor of Austin Heights Baptist Church there have been two emphases of my preaching and teaching beyond all others: emphasis on community – that the Christian faith is about relationship, relationship, relationship – with God, with each other, and with creation. The second emphasis is on practice, practice, practice – if we do not do the faith, we do not know the faith and we cannot understand Jesus if we do not act and live like Jesus. Both of these emphases are inimical to American Christianity and American life. For American Christians, especially evangelicals, it's all about individualism and it's all about what I know or what I feel that counts as real.

Yet the Apostle Paul tells us that we know nothing about the resurrection of Jesus if we're not practicing resurrection, to use Wendell Berry's famous phrase. If we do not put the resurrection to work on Monday, then no matter how loud we sing, or how warm we feel, or how loud we shout, or how much we grit our teeth, or how well we think on Sunday amounts to anything.

And Paul says, "Now concerning the collection for the saints..." In other words, "Now concerning the offering." Now concerning you giving money. This morning, I'm with Paul, in urging you to remember to practice resurrection by giving and sharing financially. Part of our dilemma and part of the challenge is that we're needing to talk about money when so many of us, so many of you, are suffering financial loss, job loss, and struggling to do the best you can. Like those disciples in John 20, we feel as if we're in a dark, locked-down room with no way to get out. Which is also why it is imperative for us to keep in touch with one

another by calling, texting, emailing, messaging, and so on, until the day comes when we can get back together in the flesh.

Meanwhile, for those of you who are able, with Paul I'm asking, "now concerning the collection" for your church. Austin Heights. We're looking at a significant construction project of shoring up our sagging roof and walls, which is going to cost a significant amount of money, which we'll probably have to borrow from the bank. We do not know the amount yet, but it will likely be upwards of around \$150,000. We'll keep you informed and be zooming with you and other ways of meeting as we learn more. Right now, I'm simply reminding you, "Now concerning the offering..."

Paul puts an emphasis on the importance of the resurrection and then moves to the "therefore" of practicing the resurrection. But sometimes it's vice versa. For many of us, this resurrection business, this faith in Christ stuff, no matter what we've read or heard, just does not make sense.

For the disciple Thomas, in our story from John 20, that's the case. Indeed, for all of these disciples in our Gospel reading from John this morning, the resurrection of the Lord simply has not connected with them.

For them, the order is not: know the resurrection then practice the resurrection. For them it is practice the resurrection then know the resurrection. These disciples are locked-down in the darkness and still locked-down a week later without any hint of grasping the resurrection of Jesus. But they were still together. They still were praying. They still were in touch with one another. They kept on

and kept on believing and not believing, having faith, having doubt all mixed together and you know what? The living Christ showed up and came among them.

They did not get up and go find him. Christ came to them and found them. They did not have perfect faith. In fact, they were full of doubt, guilt, failure, even betrayal – but they did not give up completely. And Jesus shows up.

God does not expect you to have it all together in your faith. God does not require you to know all things or understand all things or pray perfectly or read the Bible with deep understanding, or God will not show up. No. God shows up in the living Christ in the midst of our doubts, and failures and imperfect faith.

William Faulkner was once asked how he would counsel those who read *The Sound and the Fury* once or twice but still didn't get it. "Read it three times," he said.

Sometimes we have to keep at it in order to get it. We keep talking, keep worshipping, keep reading Scripture, keep praying, keep singing hymns, keep forgiving one another, keep on giving to the offering, keep volunteering, keep feeding the hungry, and keep caring for the Earth, and the living Christ will show up. We practice resurrection whether we believe it or not. And the grace of God, is that the resurrected Christ shows up.

The poet Denise Levertov wrote in an essay about her conversion to the Christian faith and the radical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. She says she was working on a long poem about the disciple Thomas (this same Thomas in our John 20 story). At the beginning of the poem, she wrote "I still considered

myself an agnostic... but a few months later, ... I discovered myself to be in a different relationship to the material... from that in which I had begun. The experience of writing the poem – that long swim through waters of unknown depth – had been also a conversion process” (*New and Selected Essays*, “Work That Enfaiths,” p. 250). Further on she says, “The writing ... has brought me a little bit closer to faith as distinct from mere shaky belief.” It’s not so much that faith leads to work as it is “work that enfaiths” (p. 255). The work leads to faith.

She wrote in another essay, “What if I began to act as if I did believe, without waiting for intellectual clarity – that is, what if I prayed, worshipped, participated in the rituals of the Church? Might not faith follow?” (*A Poet’s View*, p. 242).

Sometimes we get this resurrection. We believe it. Other times, we don’t get it. Either way, the gospel is that we’re called to do it, practice it, work it, stick to it, with the hope and prayer that the resurrected and living Christ might show up yet. And the testimony of those who have gone before us in the faith, is that the living Christ will show up.

One of my favorite resurrection stories comes from the great essayist E.B. White. He wrote about his wife, Katharine, who had died a few years earlier. She loved to garden: every year planned carefully, ordered from seed catalogues, created a new diagram for each year’s planting. After she became ill, and nearly an invalid, she continued and managed somehow to get herself outside when it was time to plant.

White wrote: “Armed with a diagram and clipboard, Katharine would get into a shabby old raincoat, much too long for her, and put on a little round wool hat and proceed to the director’s chair placed at the edge of the plot. There she would sit, hour after hour, with the wind and the weather, while Henry Allen produced dozens of paper packages of new bulbs and a basket full of old ones, ready for the intricate interment... There was something comical, yet touching in her bedraggled appearance on this awesome occasion – the small, hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand; sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying October calmly plotting the resurrection.” (*Onward and Upward in the Garden*, by Katharine S. White. Introduction by E. B. White, p. xviii-xix).

These are dark days and maybe we’re not sure what we believe. But we do not give up. We keep on calmly plotting the resurrection.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.