

## **“THE LAST WORDS OF CHRIST”**

**Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18**

**A Sermon by John Thomason**

**Woodbury UMC**

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Over the Sundays in Lent, we have listened again to the Seven Last Words of Christ from the cross. They are clearly the words of a dying man who is trying to make peace with his circumstances. There are words of compassion for those who crucified him: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” There are words of mercy for one who is dying with him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” There are words of caring for those who are left behind: “Here is your son . . . here is your mother.” There are words of emotional and spiritual anguish: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There are words of physical agony: “I am thirsty.” At the very end, there are words that bring closure to his earthly life: “It is finished.” And there are words of ultimate trust in God: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.”

After Jesus speaks his final word, he breathes his last. His body is removed from the cross, and with Pilate’s permission he is buried in a borrowed tomb. The words of this man have consistently angered the religious leaders and threatened the political authorities. Now he has been silenced, once and for all.

But his silence proves to be only temporary. The good news of Easter is that the Seven Last Words of Christ from the cross are not the seven last words of Christ! On Easter Day he is raised from the dead and continues to speak to his disciples. Our reading from the Book of Acts contains a summary of the Easter story: “They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses . . .” (Acts 10:39b-41a). In each of these appearances over a period of forty days, the voice of Jesus rings out again. He continues to instruct and encourage his followers.

Today’s Gospel lesson gives us John’s account of Jesus’ first words after his resurrection. Early on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb and discovers that the stone doorway has been rolled away. She runs to tell Peter and John, who then accompany her back to the tomb. Peter and John go inside the tomb and realize that Jesus’ body is missing. At this point, they have no reason to believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead, so they simply return to their homes, as confused and dismayed as ever.

The first person to believe in Jesus’ resurrection is Mary Magdalene herself. She remains at the tomb where she encounters two angels. Then she turns and sees another figure; the reader knows it is Jesus, but Mary does not yet know. The first words Jesus speaks to her are words of deep concern: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (John 20:15a). She assumes he is the gardener, so she asks if he has carried the body away. But when Jesus calls her by name – “Mary” – she recognizes Jesus for who he is. We’re reminded of a passage earlier in John where Jesus refers to himself the “good shepherd.” He knows his sheep by name, he says, and they respond to his voice. When Jesus calls Mary by name, she realizes that Jesus has been raised from the dead, and she cries, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher)” (v. 16).

Jesus' next word to Mary Magdalene is a command: "Do not hold on to me" (v. 17). Then he charges Mary to go and tell the disciples that he is about to ascend to the Father. Mary returns to the disciples and announces, "I have seen the Lord" (v. 18.)

John reports other appearances and other words from the lips of the risen Christ. On two occasions when he appears to the disciples, he says, "Peace be with you." To Thomas he says, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." By the Sea of Galilee, he says to the disciples, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" . . . "Cast the net to the right side of the boat and you will find some"; and then later, "Come and have breakfast." Three times he asks Peter, "Do you love me?" If so, Jesus says, "feed by sheep." And then, according to John, the last words Jesus speaks before he ascends to heaven are words the disciples have heard many times before: "Follow me."

Two other Gospel writers, Luke and Matthew, reveal a similar pattern: the same Jesus who teaches his disciples before his death is still teaching them after his resurrection. In Luke, he instructs two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, then later appears to all the disciples, offering words of peace and blessing and direction. In Matthew, his parting words on earth are what you and I have come to call the "Great Commission": "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." What an awesome, overwhelming responsibility he gives us! But then, according to Matthew, the last words of Christ before he ascends into heaven are words of comfort and assurance: "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." This is the true promise of Easter: that the one who died on the cross was raised to new life and is still present with us, still active in the world, still showing us the Way, the Truth, and the Life, still empowering us to be his witnesses. "I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The implications of this promise are astounding. Has it ever occurred to you that the last words of Christ have not yet been spoken? Christ did not suddenly fall silent when he ascended into heaven. The one who is with us to the end of the age is still speaking and will continue to speak until heaven and earth pass away.

Christ speaks to us most obviously through the Scriptures. You and I go through our seasons of doubt and despair, then we read those comforting words, "Peace be with you." We feel lost, aimless, like sheep without a shepherd, and he speaks to us again out of the pages of the Bible: "Follow me." We wring our hands as a church and ask what in the world we are supposed to be doing, and Jesus' words come back to us: "Feed my sheep" . . . "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations."

The risen Christ speaks to us through the Scriptures, and he speaks to us also through our times of quiet reflection – a nudge here, an intuition there, perhaps even a voice that comes to us with a clear direction or command. Like the time I felt led to leave my ministry career in Texas and start a new chapter of that ministry in the Northeast. I didn't hear an audible voice telling me to come here, but I had a certainty and a peace in my heart that it was the right place to go and the right thing to do. It was as if Christ were standing on a mountaintop in the Catskills, and later on a hilltop in Connecticut, saying, "John, follow me."

Christ is still speaking to individuals today as he spoke to Mary and Peter and Thomas. But to hear the voice of Christ you and I have to listen – to listen deeply. When we are praying,

most of us are more comfortable talking than listening. I once participated in a Good Friday service at a Catholic church in Liberty, New York. The service was structured around the Seven Last Words of Christ, which were interpreted in turn by several preachers. But between each homily and hymn, there were long spaces of silence, perhaps ten minutes at a time. I confess that as the service went along, I got more and more restless during those periods of silence. There I was with a golden opportunity to listen to the voice of Christ; and instead, I was listening to my stomach growl, and thinking about my own homily, and about the two pastoral visits I was scheduled to make on my way home, and about the Good Friday service I was leading in my own church that night. To hear the words of the risen Christ spoken to us individually and personally, you and I have to turn off the motor in our minds, keep silence, and truly listen.

The risen Christ speaks to us not only through the Scriptures and quiet reflection, but through the mystery we call Holy Communion. The name we assign to this meal is neither arbitrary nor accidental. We call it “Communion” for a reason. The Lord’s Supper is more than a replay of the Last Supper. It’s not just a time for remembering Christ, like we would remember any other great figure from the past; it’s a time for communing with Christ – to experience him as a living presence, to hear his voice in the words he speaks at the Table, to receive his grace in the Bread and the Cup.

My father, Johnny Thomason, died in October of 2008. Two months later, I returned to Texas for my family’s first Christmas without him. When we gathered for holiday mealtimes, my dad’s customary place at the head of the table remained empty. No one had the audacity to sit in his chair. For us, it was a sign of respect, because no one could take Daddy’s place. But it was also a reminder of his absence; he was gone and wasn’t coming back.

How different it is when the Church gathers for a meal at the Lord’s Table. The Lord whom we worship is not just an absent loved one, not just a distant memory. He is as close to us as the words he speaks across the ages: “This is my body . . . this is my blood.” He is as close to us as the bread we eat and the cup we drink, filling us with his grace and power. In Luke’s Emmaus story, the disciples talk to Jesus on the road, but they don’t recognize him until he breaks bread with them in their home. At the table, they realize they are in the presence of the risen Christ – and you and I can have this same awareness today.

The living Christ speaks to us through the Scriptures, through our times of quiet reflection, through Holy Communion, and, perhaps most of all, through other people. Christ not only speaks to us; he speaks through us, through our relationships with family members and friends, with fellow believers and total strangers.

In the summer of 1990, I met my parents and daughters for a vacation in California. I was still hurting from a number of major losses in my life. More often than not, I wasn’t very good company during that week. I was angry, depressed, and uncertain about the future. It so happened that my aunt from Tennessee, whom we called Rosey, met up with us at one point on this journey. After a two-day visit, she and I were saying goodbye on a hot afternoon in Sacramento. Rosey told me that she knew I was in a lot of emotional pain. Then she said something to me that I have never forgotten. What she said was, “John, God gives us new life.” It was the glad message of Easter in a nutshell. “God gives us new life.” I’m here to tell you that hearing those words was the beginning of my healing from grief. It was as if Jesus were standing there saying those words himself.

If you listen carefully, you will hear the risen Christ speak to you through other people – through the reassuring words of a nurse when you’re being vaccinated for COVID, through a phone call from a friend when you feel isolated and sad, through the spoken gratitude of a client at the Woodbury Food Bank; through an Easter greeting from a church member you haven’t seen in twelve months. You’ll find yourself saying, “I’d swear that voice came from some other place, from someone else.”

Friends, the last words of Christ from the cross are not his last words. Because of Easter, he continues to speak to his disciples of old, and he is still speaking to us today. Those who have ears, let them hear.