

I Jo 5: 4-12

St. John 20: 19-23

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If you had and took the chance to peruse any television over the past week and a half you know that we were offered our annual tip of the hat by studio executives to religion. The old stand-bys, like the Ten Commandments and The Greatest Story Ever Told, were dusted off and shown, along with a set of lesser lights with questionable conclusions. One, however, caught my attention: Zefferelli’s, Jesus of Nazareth, and intense and remarkably faithful rendering of the events of Holy Week and Easter. It was the conclusion of the film that perhaps was most poignant and striking. That scene takes place outside the tomb of Jesus at the late morning of Easter day. A Roman official is standing by the entrance of the sepulcher talking with the Jewish High Priest about all that had transpired during the past week. Acknowledging that the events have been trying and tense, in relief he smiles and says, “Well, this business if finally over”. With a pensive look on his face and a glance at the burial chamber, the Priest disagrees and says, “No, Now it Begins”. That is much more than a line in a movie. It is true for you and me as well. We now live in the shadow of the Resurrection, and for us, too, something new and life altering has cast its light around us.

Today is known in many liturgical churches as “Low Sunday”. That does not refer to having more bass voices in the choir!! I suspect the term was coined by some preacher who knew that seating in the pews would not be hard to find. (Actually it shows the contrast with the High Feast a week earlier and may be a corruption of the Latin word Laudes) As I sometimes say the Easter lilies, both the plants and the human variety have faded. The “alleluias” and hymns are not so robust, the homilies a little more challenging to write, and there is a bit of a letdown following last week’s celebration. It is almost as if we are afraid of something. Maybe it is fear that the Easter faith will not last. Or perhaps it is the realization that Easter will now call us to not simply observe, but to embrace the resurrection, be changed by our redeemed situation, and act in new ways that we have not done in the past.

The Gospel from John appointed for this day needs to be read clearly and, I believe, not only as a record of how those disciples felt and reacted, BUT as a record about us, too. Could it not be that John is asking us to imagine ourselves in that room?? They are gathered together having hoped for so many things—new freedoms, a change in the Roman power structure, the re-establishment of a Jewish kingdom in Jerusalem, and an ongoing relationship with their deepest friend. They hoped that life would just go on like it had before, but with a few “perks” added along the way. And now, rather than those desires being met they find themselves disappointed, with hopes dashed, and a very real possibility that they, like their friend, would be hounded right to the point of death. All of this even after hearing of the resurrection!! They are afraid that Jesus’ journey for them will not be enough. St. John’s portrait of these frightened and bedraggled “heroes of the church” is not very flattering. So why does he expose them so openly? Is it because their story is our story? Maybe we, too, have had our deepest hopes and dreams taken from us. Perhaps we look at life and know in some recess of our souls that we are

not what we wish to be and that we have not become what we had hoped to become. Possibly John is calling us to see our fears in theirs and know that is not the end of things. And it is just quite likely that the losses they experienced were necessary losses. For in giving up some things new doors are opened, and new gifts can be received. So often fear is a closed door, but a door nonetheless, that once opened or transcended takes us to places we could not have imagined. This is how God works. New life only comes after dying. Now it Begins.

If the truth is told, knock on any door of any parish and you will find behind it some measure of agony and fear. It may be immediate and apparent or more dimly seen, but no less real. I am reminded of a hospital visit I made that started out as a “routine” pastoral call, if there is such a thing. Making rounds I came to the door, which was closed, and I knocked to announce my presence. A physician came to the door and quietly asked if I could wait for just a few minutes until he had finished. Then he said, “please, don’t go anywhere, just stay where you are”. As promised a few moments passed and then he came out, looked at me and said, “it is really a good thing you are here now”. I thought to myself—oh nuts—except those were not the words I thought!! Entering the room and finding the person and a daughter it was quickly apparent things were not well. After a few words the person told me that the verdict was a terminal illness, and that no further treatment except comfort measures was possible. A few minutes into the conversation the patient simply stated that she was afraid, and I acknowledged that seemed very understandable. Then she said, “oh, it is not that I fear dying. I fear going through this alone”. “Will you be there with me as I go through this”? It was not me personally she was asking about—it was rather me as a representative of our faith. She wanted to know whether or not God would be there with her as she moved through this door into the unknown and unseen.

We have our moments like this as well. It may not be a terminal illness, but it can be things that frighten us and leave us wondering whether we will be abandoned to be captive to our fears. We wonder if hope is imagined or real. And the only way we, or anyone, can know the answer to that is through the presence and faithfulness of another. We are told by John that Jesus came through the attempts of the disciples to close out the world of their anxieties. He merely spoke to them the words—peace be with you. Peace in this sense is not the absence of fears, but the presence of one who has gone through death and now opens the future up for them to participate with Him in life that belongs to God and not fear. He tells them the way to the future is to give the world an option—to live in light of the resurrection. As the Father has sent me, now I send you. I have overcome the world.

Herbert Tarr tells the story of young man who has been raised by an aunt and uncle and given love, support, and the presence of a home. As he is boarding a train to leave them all this passes through his mind and he says, “How can I ever repay you”? You don’t need to, says his uncle. There is a saying, that the love of a parent goes to their children, and the love of those children must go to their children. “That’s not so” says the boy. “I will always try to repay you”. The aunt breaks in by saying, “David, what you uncle means is that a parents love can never be repaid, it can only be passed on”. If this “Low Sunday” means anything it is that God has taken all our sins, doubts, hopes, and fears

SERMON – FIRST SUNDAY AFTER EASTER – 19 APRIL, 2020
St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina
Father Mark Menees, D.D.

into Himself and has given us back love by Christ's presence which overcomes fear. He only asks that we now give it away. Now it Begins. Amen+