

Scripture Readings and Sermon

April 19, 2020 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Acts 2:14a, 22–32 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

Filled with the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Peter is given the wisdom and eloquence to give the first of five sermons recorded in the Book of Acts. Peter's address is not simply to the local Jewish population but to all the Israelites who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the festival of *Shavu'ot* ("Weeks") established in Leviticus 23:16. Peter proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth was not only appointed by God as evidenced by "deeds of power, wonders, and signs" but also by his death and resurrection. Peter uses Psalm 16 to show that God revealed this plan to David who referred to the resurrection since all bodies had "experienced corruption" (decay) except for Jesus who was raised. As the Son of Man, Jesus experienced death but death could not hold Jesus since Jesus as Son of God is life and through Him all things were made. This resurrection which was witnessed not by a few but by all eleven of the disciples testifies to the fact that Jesus was and is the Son of God.

Commentary on 1 Peter 1:3–9 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The opening "blessed be the God of..." is frequently found in the Old Testament relationship to a patriarch such as Abraham, Issac, and Joseph. Each of these patriarchs is associated with the covenant and the "promised land". By adding "Father" and "our Lord", Peter notes that the heirs of the covenant are no longer limited to a blood line but rather to those who are given "new birth" through faith in the lordship of the resurrected of Jesus Christ. The new "inheritance" is not a piece of land subject to wars and struggle but a heavenly promised land "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading". The covenant is no longer based on cultural heritage or ritual obedience but on "living hope" and "genuineness of your faith". New birth does not exclude suffering or trials but rather a heart filled with "an indescribable and glorious joy" even in the midst of being "tested by fire". In this brief section, Peter describes the reason for a Christian's faith ("the salvation of your souls"), hope ("the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"), and love ("an indescribable and glorious joy").

Commentary on John 20:19-31 (*Youtube [Lectionary Study Video](#)*)

The Gospel of John, written some sixty years after the resurrection, was aimed at an audience who were beginning to realize that the second coming may not happen as soon as they originally believed. It is this doubt that is reflected not only in Thomas but in all the disciples. Even after the women had proclaimed Jesus' resurrection and, according to Luke, two of their own had encountered Jesus on the road, the disciples were "locked" in a room because of fear. When Jesus comes the first time, he doesn't just say "Peace be with you" once but twice. Jesus, "a week later", finds the disciples still behind the same shut doors and for a third time has to tell them "Peace". Thomas who missed the first time is just as doubtful as the other disciples had been and simply requested the same proof. For John, Thomas represents the new generation of believers who were demanding the second coming in order to affirm their faith. To these believers, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." This becomes the creed of faith for the young church who was beginning to realize that it may be a while before Jesus returned.

Sermon "Freed From Doubt" (*[Sermon Video](#)*)

The gospel reading this Sunday is the familiar story of "Doubting Thomas". A story so famous that it has entered into the dictionary of common phrases meaning someone who demands proof. Does Thomas, however, get too much of the blame? The fact is that all the disciples had their doubts. Despite the testimony of the women and those who returned from their journey to Emmaus, the

disciples were still locked in their room not just once but twice even after Jesus' appearance. Their doubt driven by fear is evident through Jesus' proclamation three times "Peace be with you".

The simple truth is that all Christians, even the first disciples, have moments of fear and doubt. Like Peter walking on the water, we start out fine but soon "reality" hits us. The world simply doesn't work that way and our confidence in faith soon begins to fade. Jesus is risen we proclaimed last Sunday only to be met with the growing death toll of the pandemic. The declaration that there is nothing to fear is soon over shadowed by that nagging cough and the thought that maybe I should be tested for COVID19. The unpredictability of the world has given us many reasons to both doubt and fear. Sometimes, that fear and doubt bring out the worst in humanity. And yet, even in the midst of our failings and doubts, God gives us words of grace.

In the middle of their doubts and fears, Jesus offered all the disciples the assurance of peace. Faced with the wonder of Pentecost and the realization that they may have killed their Messiah, Peter offers the crowd the comforting knowledge that even Jesus' death was part of God's larger plan of salvation. Like the early church that Peter was writing to in the letter of 1 Peter, we need to hear the message of our living hope. We need to know that when everything in our world is in flux, our inheritance in Christ is "imperishable, undefiled, and unfading". In the midst of economic instability and serious questions about the future, our world needs to experience "indescribable and glorious joy" of having Jesus in their hearts. If faith were obvious or easy, it wouldn't be called faith and it wouldn't stand the test of time. Deep faith is formed during times like these when all we can do is walk by faith and hope.

I am not ignorant of the very serious life struggles going on in the lives of so many today. Anxiety, depression, and emotional fatigue are very real and could manifest into very dangerous actions toward one's self or those around them. Social interactions at work and at school are pressure valves that help families deal with pressures at home. Social isolation not only brings significant financial hardships but a volatile emotional strain on relationships. Proclaiming words of faith and grace during times like these is not some form of escapism or "opiate" as Karl Marx once described religion. These words remind us of a truth deeper than the troubles of the day. A truth that we can stand on when everything around us is shifting. A truth that does not deny our very real suffering but gives us the assurance that even these storms will eventually pass. Words of peace and hope in scripture were not formed on a mountaintop but in the valley of persecution and imminent death. They are words that have sustained the faithful for nearly 2,000 years and will continue to sustain all those who dare to step out in faith today. May the Peace of the Lord be with you today.