

**The First Community Church of Southborough
137 Southville Road
Southborough, Massachusetts 01772-1937**

**The Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. – Pastor
www.firstcommunitychurch.com
Church: (508) 485-2607
Pastor: (508) 543-7160
Text: (508) 873-0534
Email:paulsandersonphd@gmail.com**

**May 2, 2021
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
Orthodox Easter**

The Pastor's Reflection

This reflection by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson, D.Min., Ph.D. will be posted in a written form and also an audio form as part of a devotional service on www.firstcommunitychurch.com.

Scripture Lessons: James 2:14-17
John 21:1-19

Jesus said to him [Peter], "Feed my lambs." (John 21:15)

This morning I once again wish you a happy Easter! Today is the day that the Eastern Orthodox branch of the Christian church celebrates Easter. So, if you meet someone who is Greek today, someone like our own Marlene Joe or Mary Coldwell, you should say "Christos anesti!" which means, "Christ is risen!" The person will respond "Alithos!" which means, "He is risen indeed!"

Whatever you do, don't tell them that today, May 2, may be *Greek* Easter, but April 4 was the *real* Easter. Don't say this unless you want to see a mad Greek, which, trust me, you don't want to see! Religious wars have been fought over less! Seriously!

For those of us in the western church, Easter has come and gone. If we were meeting in church this morning, with the exception of the cross still draped in white, the lily cross above the altar, and the other decorations that graced our sanctuary on Easter Sunday would have been removed. The lilies and tulips that surrounded the altar would have been dispersed to our homes where, hopefully, we can keep them alive for a while inside or even plant them outside that they might return year after year.

The scripture lessons we explore throughout the Easter season speak to the disciples' experiences following our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection. The Gospel of

John is helpful in this because John not only reports the disciples' words and actions; he also tells us how they felt.

You know the story. Jesus has been crucified. His body has been laid in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea, who is described in the Gospel of Matthew as a disciple of Jesus. He is, of course, not one of the original twelve, but he was probably a member of that inner circle of followers that the gospels identify as disciples.

On the first day of the week, the day following the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body. When she arrives, she finds the stone covering the opening to the tomb has been rolled away. She immediately runs and tells Peter and John. They run to the tomb, examine it—note that it is empty, but they do not understand what has happened. They simply return to where they are staying.

Mary, for some reason, remains by the tomb. Maybe she just stands there trying to make sense of what she has seen, trying to make sense of what has happened. Suddenly she becomes aware that two angels in white are sitting at the head and the foot of the place where Jesus lay. The angels ask her why she is weeping. In the course of responding to their inquiry, Mary experiences a presence behind her. She turns around and sees Jesus, but she does not recognize him. Mistakenly supposing him to be the gardener, she asks him if he knows who has removed her Lord's body from the tomb and what they have done with it. It is only when Jesus calls her name that she recognizes the one to whom she is speaking.

Jesus tells Mary to tell the disciples, whom he refers to as his brothers, that he is ascending to the Father. I find it interesting that he now refers to his disciples as brothers, which places the disciples and him on the same level—a level of deep kinship. I think this is what Jesus wants of us as well—not to worship him, but to work with him, to not only preach or share the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God, but to incarnate it in a world that desperately needs it. Jesus not only wants us to spread the good news of his healing miracles; he wants us to become agents of God's healing power in people's lives. In any event, Mary goes and tells the eleven remaining disciples that she has seen the Lord. She reports to them what Jesus has said to her, but it does not seem that the disciples believe her.

Later that same day, as the disciples are gathered behind locked doors, Jesus suddenly, mysteriously, appears in their midst and tells them, "Peace be with you." He shows them the wounds in his hands and his side. Then he breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit."

Thomas Didymus, the one who is called the twin, is not present with the other disciples when Jesus appears, blesses the disciples, and transmits the Holy Spirit to them. When his fellow disciples tell Thomas that they have seen the Lord, he is not convinced. He is not willing to base his beliefs upon the testimony or even the experiences of others. Thomas says to his fellow disciples,

Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe. (John 20:25)

A week later, the disciples are once again gathered behind closed doors. They are hanging together, probably trying to make sense of what they have seen and heard. This time, however, Thomas is with them. Jesus, again, suddenly, mysteriously, appears. He once again bestows the blessing, the gift of peace upon them; he says, "Peace be with you." Fully aware of Thomas's reservations regarding his resurrection, Jesus then turns to Thomas and invites him to go ahead and touch his hands and his side. When Jesus extends this invitation to Thomas, Thomas realizes it truly is the Lord! Jesus then says to him,

Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe. (John 20:29)

I like it when Jesus says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" because *this describes us!* We have not actually seen Jesus in his human form. We did not spend three years walking with him, talking with him, breaking bread with him as the disciples did. We were not there to listen to his teachings. We were not there to witness his miracles and bear witness to his healings. And yet, somehow, in some strange way, in some miraculous way, perhaps through the grace of God, we, even with all our doubts, have come to believe!

I also find it interesting that Jesus, in his attempt to prove to Thomas that he is indeed risen from the dead, does not appear to Thomas in all his shining magnificent glory, the way Yahweh showed himself to Moses on the mountain or when Moses was sheltered in the cleft of the rock. Instead of proving who he was by manifesting his divinity, Jesus offers Thomas evidence of his humanity. He shows Thomas his wounds, the marks of his suffering on the cross. He invites Thomas to actually touch his hands and his side, to touch his pain. It is not recorded whether Thomas does this. I suspect that by this point in the encounter he doesn't have to.

The disciples' experiences of the risen Christ following Jesus' resurrection fall into the category of what Abraham Maslow would call peak experiences, what Rudolf Otto would call experiences of the numinous, what the psychologist William James would call powerful religious or spiritual experiences. Mary and the disciples realize that their Lord lives, that he lives not only in their memories, but also in their lives and in the

world. They receive his blessing of peace, the transmission of his peace to them. They receive the Holy Spirit that he breathes into them, the breath of new life. This should have been all that was necessary to transform doubters into believers, to transform disciples and followers into apostles.

Actually, the followers of Jesus fall into several categories. We can think of them as occupying several concentric circles of varying band widths. Most of the people of the land were probably indifferent to Jesus and his teachings. They would be on the outside circle. This circle would be very large. Those whom the gospels identify as “the crowds” are those who, on special events like Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, are at least curious. They might have heard stories about this wandering preacher, perhaps even the rumor that he brought his friend Lazarus back from the dead. They stop to look. This circle, the next one in, is also quite large.

Those whom the gospels identify as “followers of Jesus” are those who are even closer to the center. Some of them may have had personal contact with Jesus or travelled with him. It is recorded that some of them, specifically some of the women, provided for him and his disciples. According to scripture, there may have been several hundred followers, so the area within this concentric circle is smaller than that of the other two circles.

From this group of followers Jesus calls twelve disciples. These are his inner circle, his daily companions, the ones who travel with him, who hear his words and witness his healing miracles. In some passages, however, it seems that there are more than twelve disciples and that people like Mary Magdalene, Cleopas, and Joseph of Arimathea could be described as disciples.

It strikes me that the diagram we are using to describe where people stood in relation to Jesus is still applicable today. In the 1937 Gallup Poll, the first time the question “Do you happen to be a member of a church, synagogue, or mosque?” was asked, 73% of people in this country identified themselves as having a religious affiliation of some sort. The number remained in the low 70s for the rest of the century.

Beginning around 2000, however, the number of Americans belonging to a house of worship went into a nosedive. In the most recent poll, carried out in 2020, this number has shrunk to 47%. So, only 47% of Americans identify themselves as having a religious affiliation of some sort: Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, etc. It appears that the majority of people, at least in our country, have taken up residence in the outer concentric circle. For the first time in the history of our country, only a minority of Americans are affiliated with a religious institution or organization.

As we move in toward the center, we encounter those who claim some religious affiliation though they are not a part of any church and never attend religious services. Perhaps they feel a certain religious affiliation because, as infants, they were baptized in a church or because their parents were members of a particular church. Moving further toward the center we have those who may attend on special days but do not feel drawn to support the church with their time, talent, and treasure. As we move further in, we find those who are constantly working to deepen their faith, their relationship with God through worship, prayer, study, and mission outreach. In the innermost circle are those for whom being a disciple of Jesus, a follower of the Way, is a central part of their identity. Their relationship with God shapes and defines who they are; it gives their life both meaning and direction.

Although the terms are used somewhat interchangeably in the gospels, I think the disciples become apostles after Jesus' death. Whereas disciples are students, followers of the spiritual discipline that we know as the Way, apostles are ordained to bring the good news of the kingdom of God into the world and carry out their Lord's ministry of healing. Following the resurrection and the post-resurrection experiences of the risen Christ, the disciples should have become apostles. But they didn't. As we heard this morning, Peter says to the other disciples, "I am going fishing."

Before they became disciples, Peter, Andrew, James and John were fisherman. When Jesus called them to be his disciples, he told them they would become "fishers of people." Now they have returned to the place where they began. Once again, they are fishers of fish.

The disciples' regression, their return to their old ways, is an example of backsliding. Backsliding is a term used to describe the process of gradually turning or falling away from a commitment to the spiritual journey. It is not easy to be a disciple of the Way. The old way, whatever it is, has a certain power. In the case of an addiction, as we know, it can have a demonic power, a destructive power against which the ego is relatively powerless. There is something, either the power of inertia or some greater power, a darker power, that works to draw us back into the old patterns of living, to draw us back from living the full implications of our Easter experience.

The first lesson from this passage of scripture is about our propensity to backslide. The second is about the emptiness of the old way. The disciples return to their old lives, their old ways, but it is not the same. We are never the same after an Easter experience, or at least we *should* never be the same! Scripture tells us that they fished all night, but they came up empty.

If we are honest, we will admit that the old ways are essentially empty! If we are struggling against the demonic power of an addiction, it is tempting to return to the addictive substance or activity. However, if we have had an experience of having been helped and strengthened by our Higher Power and our involvement in the recovery movement, the minute we relapse we discover that the alcohol, the heroin, the adrenaline rush of gambling has lost its luster. Thomas Wolff was correct when he said that we can never go home again. This is especially true after we have been changed by an encounter with the risen Christ.

When the disciples return to their old life, they separate themselves from the presence of their Lord and his call. The third lesson of today's scripture is a revelation concerning how this gap, this separation or alienation is bridged.

If we think about it, we will realize that we have had many Easter experiences, moments when we have been touched by God or felt the presence of God. When these peak experiences drift out of our consciousness, when their power is diminished by the mundane tasks and activities of our daily lives, we may feel that all is lost. Remember, the disciples are not searching for Jesus. They are simply fishing.

With regard to the search, the search that should follow our Easter experiences, Walter Percy, the American author and writer of philosophical novels has said,
The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Nor to be onto something is to be in despair.

The psychoanalyst Erich Fromm, expands on this theme when he tells us,
We try to evade the question [of existence] with property, prestige, power, production, pleasure, and, ultimately, by trying to forget that we—that I---exist. No matter how often we think of God or go to church, or how much we believe in religious ideas, if, as a whole person, we are deaf to the question of existence, if we do not have an answer to it, we are marking time, and we live and die like one of the million things we produce. We think of God instead of experiencing God.

Even at those times when we forget to search for that from which we have become separated, all is not lost. We may not be looking for Jesus, but Jesus is looking for us! We may not be reaching out to Jesus, but Jesus is reaching out to us! Just as with Peter, God reaches out to us through the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit who dwells both within and among us.

Once again, let us turn to the insights of the Eastern Contemplative Traditions. The Canadian Rinzai Zen master Maurine Stuart, one of the first female Zen masters to teach in the United States, in her book *Subtle Sound*, has noted,

The word “meditation” comes from the Latin meditare, which is the passive form of the verb, meaning “being moved to the center.” It is not the active form, which is “moving to the center.” We are being moved to the center. This center is our own essence. Sitting after sitting, letting everything go, we become more aware of our own personal center. We become more rooted in it. This simple act of sitting absolutely still, letting everything drop off, has far-reaching effects. (emphasis mine)

I find this comforting. In prayer or meditation, we do not need to move to the center on our own. We do not need to seek God. God has taken the initiative in this undertaking by reaching out to us, by drawing us closer to our true spiritual center, to what Jesus tells us is the Holy Spirit within us.

So, the third lesson is that God is always reaching out to us, even during those times when we are not reaching out to God. We witness to this in the words of our beloved hymn, *Draw Thou, My Soul, O Christ*, written by Lucy Larcom in 1892. The words are as follows:

*Draw Thou, my soul, O Christ,
Closer to Thine;
Breathe into every wish
Thy will divine;
Raised my low self above,
Won by Thy deathless love,
Ever, O Christ, through mine
Let Thy life shine.*

Draw my soul closer to you, to its true center. The initiative has already been taken. All we have to do is open our heart, surrender, yield.

The fourth lesson is that Christ not only reconnects with the disciples, helping them to experience abundance in their daily lives, he actually feeds them. When they arrive at the shore, they find he has prepared breakfast for them. He feeds them with fish and bread. He feeds them with his body and his blood. And he also feeds us!

We can be nourished in our moments of worship. Perhaps we are touched by a word of scripture. Something we never heard, something we never realized jumps out at us. I am often moved to tears by the words and music of our anthems and our hymns. We can be fed in moments of prayer and as we share in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. And we can be nourished by our encounter with the risen Christ if we can discover him in our everyday lives.

Finally, as is clear from our scripture lesson this morning, Christ calls the disciples to make a commitment. He tells them to serve others. Like the disciples, the experience of the risen Christ always asks something of us. It challenges us to halt the regressive backsliding that pulls us away from our church/synagogue/mosque/temple and our own spiritual journey. It also calls us to move forward into the world as apostles, as bearers of the Good News both in our words and in our deeds.

The risen Christ not only calls us to become disciples, followers of the Way; he calls us to become apostles, to carry out his work in the world. Christ tells Peter, “If you really love me as much as you say you do, you will feed my lambs.” As James tells us in his letter to the early church,

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,” and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith, by itself, if it has no works, is dead.

I would say that faith without works is not dead; it is actually not faith. It might be confused with religious observance, with church membership, with holding an orthodox set of theological beliefs. But real faith cannot refrain from responding to the needs of the world!

That’s the way it is with Jesus. Every conversion to him is a call to work *for* him and *with* him. Revelation and call go together. The risen Christ does not say to the disciples on the beach, “I am Jesus, raised from the dead.” He also doesn’t say “I am Jesus, raised from the dead; worship me.”

He says, “I am Jesus, raised from the dead, and I have some work for you to do!”

Jesus tells his disciples to feed his lambs. This is typical of Jesus. To the very ones who only a few days earlier had forsaken him, to those who were nowhere to be found when he was arrested and crucified, he issues a call to apostleship. He entrusts these very human, very fallible men and women with his most important work. He does the same to us.

What work is the risen Christ calling us to do? When he says, “Feed my sheep,” what do you think he means? Do you think he is calling us to protect those who are most vulnerable: those who are the victims of misogynous, homophobic, transphobic, anti-Semitic, anti-Asian, racist, or Islamophobic prejudice, discrimination, or persecution? Do you think he is asking us to devote more of our abundant resources in this country to

the one in ten children who live in poverty? Do you think he is asking us to care for this precious planet that he has entrusted to us? Do you think he is asking the world to devote more of its abundant resources not only to the care of the 65 million refugees that have lost their homes and their homelands, but to address the underlying conditions that give rise to this tragic situation?

We need to think about the invitation that Jesus extends to us not only today, in our worship or reflection, but also tomorrow when, like the disciples, we return to our normal, everyday life. Christ would keep us from drifting back into the old ways. The old ways are empty, and we know it.

When we feel we have lost touch with Jesus, we can reach out to him. He is not far from any one of us; in fact, he is nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Even during those dark times when we do not have the sense to reach out to him, all is not lost. You see, Jesus is reaching out to us. We are being drawn to the center. Our souls are being drawn to Christ. All we have to do is open our hearts. The risen Christ will search us out, find us, give us a big hug, and nourish our souls.

Then he will give us his work to do!

Let us be about this work as resurrection people and as a resurrection church. As we journey forth as twenty-first century apostles, God grant that the light is planted within our soul will never go out, and that we will find ways to share this precious light with a broken and darkened world.