

May 1 Sermon

The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Rejoice, the Lord is risen. Today is the second Sunday of the Easter Season. This season extends through the 50 days until Pentecost. The word rejoice appears in all four of our readings today. In our reading from Acts, Peter quotes King David saying, "I saw the Lord always before me, therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover my flesh will live in hope." Our Psalm for the day, Psalm 16 is the very psalm Peter was quoting. In the first letter of Peter, Peter tells his listeners the story of the resurrection and that, "In this you rejoice".

In our gospel reading, it is Easter Sunday: the day that Christ "is risen." The disciples, however, are not rejoicing. They have been through some week. They came into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday following their leader through the streets. They have been with him from the beginning of his public ministry. They have heard his message over and over. They have witnessed miracles and healings. He has been trying to tell them that he will be leaving them, but they haven't been listening to that. Maybe they didn't want to hear.

During the short week they have been in Jerusalem they have seen him arrested, convicted, crucified; and buried. The last time they saw him alive was on Thursday when they shared the Passover meal with him in this very room. Some of them went with him to Gethsemane. There he asked them to keep watch, but they fell asleep. Then when he was arrested, they ran away in fear of their lives. Peter had denied him three times. How could it be that Jesus was dead! How could everything have gone so wrong?

Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb and found that even his body was gone. She reported a conversation with a man standing there who turned out to be Jesus himself. He told her he was awaiting ascension. When she ran to tell the disciples, they didn't believe her.

Now they have gathered behind locked doors to share their fear and shame. That was when Jesus appeared in their midst. He said to them, "Peace be with you." This was a customary greeting but what those words must have meant to them. There he was right there among them. They gathered around him and he showed them his hands and his side so that they could know it really was Jesus their leader, teacher, friend. Then he said again, "Peace be with you." Now it was time to rejoice. Then he "breathed" on them. Breathing seems to be a term used to denote the presence of the Holy Spirit. Then he told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Their lives were changed forever and they rejoiced.

Thomas wasn't with them when all this happened. When they saw him the next day and shared their experience, Thomas didn't believe a word of it not any more than the others had believed Mary Magdalene. He demanded proof. He wanted to see and feel the marks of the wounds which caused Jesus' suffering and eventually his death. I don't blame him: it sounds crazy.

A week later they were gathered together again in the house with all the doors locked. This time Thomas was with them. Again Jesus appeared to them with the greeting “Peace be with you.” He invited Thomas to “Put your finger here and see my hands: and put out your hand and place it in my side: do not be faithless, but believing.” Thomas acknowledged that he believed. Then Jesus asked the all important question, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” This is the dilemma which the disciples will face, how will they convince those who have not seen. In our reading from the Acts of the Apostles we see Peter in action.

Peter’s sermon, as it is sometimes called, takes place after the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. The gospel writers have differences of opinion about just when the event we call Pentecost actually happened. People have received the Holy Spirit and they are rejoicing in the streets. The crowd outside the building wants to know what it is all about. Peter follows the pattern which will be used over and over again as the disciples spread the good news. He reminds them that they know Jesus of Nazareth. That Jesus was able to do deeds of power, wonders, and signs. That they had allowed him to be crucified: killed by those outside the law. But it was impossible for him to be held by death.

He follows this with a quote from Psalm 16. The Jews in the crowd are all familiar with Psalm 16. . It was the practice in their religious observances to sing psalms. It was part of their heritage from King David. They knew the whole psalm as well as the significance of the words. He further explains the quote by saying that David knew one of his descendants would be the Messiah and that he would be resurrected from the dead. The fact that he and the other disciples who were right there with him witnessed this resurrection was enough proof that the prophecies were fulfilled and that Jesus was the Messiah. We are told later that over 3000 souls were baptized that day.

Jesus said to the disciples who were with him, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” That’s who we are. We have not seen nails and wounds and talked with Jesus. Yet sometime in our lives, maybe even right now, we have known Jesus through the Holy Spirit and we believe. We too can tell the story of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. We can share our stories of how he has acted in our lives. We can rejoice in the knowledge of the forgiveness of our sins and the eternal life he has promised.

Rejoice, the Lord is risen: the Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia