

John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe."

Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!"

Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

5/1/2011 Sermon by Susi Kawolics

As I mentioned earlier, today is Holy Humor Sunday. It is a tradition to use this day to focus on the joy that comes from being a Christian. It's not certain where this custom originated, but it may be rooted in the thoughts of early church theologians who said that God played a practical joke on the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. They believed that Jesus' resurrection should fill us joy and laughter. Episcopal Bishop William C. Frey writes that: "To believe in [the resurrection of Jesus] is to be part of that huge practical joke that God plays on those who trust blindly in the sufficiency of human reason to unravel all problems and to answer every question. Easter is the morning when the Lord laughs out loud, laughs at all the things that snuff out joy, all the things that pretend to be all-powerful, like cruelty and madness and despair and evil, and most especially, that great pretender, death. Jesus sweeps them away with His wonderful resurrection laughter."

Now, this Sunday is usually known for its low attendance at church, and therefore humor was used in hopes of enticing people to come to church. But perhaps the observation of Holy Humor Sunday got out of hand one year, because, and this is true, in Nicholas County W. VA there is a law on the books that says: No member of the clergy is allowed to tell jokes or humorous stories from the pulpit during a church service. Maybe by the end of this service, you'll wish you lived in Nicholas County, but I hope not.

Humor really does have its place in the spiritual life. In his book "Prayers for a Planetary Pilgrim," author and priest Edward Hays says that we should always carry the balance bar of humor when we walk the spiritual high wire. Laughter and humor have been proven to relieve

pain, help cure illness, and increase general health and well-being. They keep the flow of divine energy going.

So for today's sermon, I am going to follow the example of 2 authors, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klien who wrote the book Plato and a Platypus Walk into a Bar: Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes. In that book, the authors use jokes to explain basic philosophical concepts. For example: A Salesman says to woman: "Ma'am, this vacuum cleaner will cut your work in half." She says: "Terrific! Give me two of them." The authors write that this joke sheds light on the philosophical concept of Zeno's paradox about every time you cut something in half, you still have half and can never reach zero. In that same vein, I hope to be able to get my theological concepts across by using jokes and humor.

Our lectionary scripture today is the one that is always for the Sunday after Easter. We hear about Jesus coming back to the disciples on Easter Sunday evening, and then the story of Thomas, who missed that gathering, and proclaimed that he would not believe that Jesus really came back until he had seen for himself.

The first thing that strikes me from this reading is the gracious and expansive forgiveness of Jesus. He had been disappointed, denied, and deserted by his disciples on Friday. Yet he comes into the room on Sunday evening, through the shut doors, to be with them, to show them he has indeed risen from the dead. Jesus could really have behaved like the rich man who died, and left this in his will:

"To my loving wife Rose, who stood by me in rough times, as well as good, I leave the house and \$2 million."

"To my daughter Jessica, who looked after me in sickness and kept the business going, I leave the yacht, the business and \$1 million."

"And, to my cousin Dan, who hated me, argued with me, and thought that I would never mention him in my will - well he was wrong. Hi Dan!"

Jesus could have come to those disciples with sarcasm, with reprimands, or anger, but instead, his first words to them are "Peace be with you." He does not hold any ill feeling, any grudge against them. He has forgiven them completely, and then goes on to bequeath to them the greatest gift he has to offer: the gift of the Holy Spirit. This incredible and deep forgiveness of his is held out as an example to us, a goal for us to strive for as we seek to walk the Christian path.

This encounter that the disciples had with Jesus on Easter evening was an incredible experience. It was unexpected, undeserved, nearly unbelievable. They had the opportunity to see for themselves Jesus' hands and his side. Unfortunately for Thomas, he was somewhere else, so he missed it. He did not have a chance to see with his own eyes, to touch with his own hands, and so when his friends tell him about it, he just can't believe them. Sometimes, it is hard to trust your friends, isn't it? Like in this story of three turtles, Joe, Steve, and Poncho, who decide to go on a picnic. The picnic site is 10 miles away, so it takes the turtles 10 whole days to get there. When they do arrive, as they unpack the basket, they realize that they've forgotten to bring a bottle opener. Joe & Steve beg Poncho to turn back home and retrieve it. Poncho refuses, saying that they'll eat everything before he gets back. But the other two turtles promise they'll wait for him, so Poncho sets off down the road, slow and steady.

Well, ten days pass, and no Poncho, then twenty days pass, but still no Poncho. Joe and Steve are hungry, but they keep their promise. After thirty days, however, and still no Poncho, they give up, unwrap a sandwich and open their mouths to eat it. Right at that instant, Poncho pops out from behind a rock and says, "See, I knew I couldn't trust you. That's why I'm not going!"

Well, my hope is that all of us have friends whom we can trust more than Poncho did. Because it is often the witness of either friends or family that first leads us to our own belief in Jesus, to our faith. When we are told by someone else of their beliefs, and we see the joy that their faith brings them, that's when we often want to know more, want to have that for ourselves. When we hear their stories, our own faith is strengthened. I have people in my life who, despite carrying heavy burdens, experiencing tragic losses, or suffering, continue to believe, and to hold onto their faith. When I, like Thomas, have my doubts about Jesus, these are the people I look to. They help me to work through my doubts and grow stronger in my faith.

There are those, however, who really want a big sign, a strong proof for their faith. Like these four rabbis who were always having theological arguments, and three were always in accord against the fourth. One day, the odd rabbi out, made a statement about God that he was sure was true. When the others didn't agree with him, he decided to appeal to a higher authority.

"Oh, God!" he cried. "I know in my heart that I am right and they are wrong! Please give me a sign to prove it to them!"

It was a beautiful, sunny day. As soon as the rabbi finished his prayer, a storm cloud moved across the sky above the four. It rumbled once and dissolved. "A sign from God!" he said, "See, I'm right, I knew it!"

But the other three disagreed, pointing out that storm clouds could form on hot days naturally.

So the rabbi prayed again: "Oh, God, I need a bigger sign to show that I am right and they are wrong." This time four storm clouds appeared, rushed toward each other to form one big cloud, and a bolt of lightning slammed into a tree on a nearby hill.

"I told you I was right!" cried the rabbi, but his friends insisted that nothing had happened that could not be explained by natural causes.

The rabbi was getting ready to ask for a *very big* sign, but just as he said, "Oh God...", the sky turned pitch black, the earth shook, and a deep, booming voice intoned, "HEEEEEEEEE'S RIIIIIIIGHT!"

The rabbi put his hands on his hips, turned to the other three, and said, "Well?"

"So," shrugged one of the other rabbis, "now it's 3 against 2. We're still right."

So in the end, what's really important is what we do with our faith. Obviously, the 3 rabbis in the story had a big sign from God, but they continued in their old ways. Thomas, however, received the proof he was looking for, and proclaimed, "My Lord and My God." He and the other disciples were changed to the core once they saw Jesus resurrected. They proceeded to go out and proclaim their beliefs to others, to form communities, to begin passing on the faith from generation to generation. Today, through the gospels and the sacraments, that faith has been passed down through the millennia, we are the recipients of this faith. We are the blessed ones about whom Jesus speaks when he says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now it is our turn. Even though we have not experienced Jesus in the same way as the disciples did, we may be the ones that others are looking to. It may be our faith that others need to see in order to believe.

Today we take the opportunity to strengthen our faith through the sacrament of communion. We are invited to this table to join Jesus, in the spirit of forgiveness that he showed, the spirit of peace that he gave, the spirit of joy that he engenders. We celebrate our Lord, who was set free from death, who sets us free from sin and death, who promises everlasting life. As his followers, let us come to this table with gratitude and joy in our hearts.

And from this here, as we are filled with new life and with grace, may we delight in sharing it with others; and giving it away with laughter on our lips and joy in our hearts. Amen.

Announcements:

Mindful MOMdays

Blanket Sunday

Coffee Hour

Before the offering:

Offering:

A \$100 bill, a \$20 bill and a \$1 bill at the end of their useful lives were together, about to be shredded. The \$100 says, "I've seen the whole world during my lifetime, Why, I've been on cruises in the Caribbean, safaris in Africa, and vacations in Europe."

The \$20 says, "Well, I've not done quite as well as you, but I have been to Atlantic City, Disneyland, and Starbucks."

They both turn to the \$1 and ask, "How about you? Where have you been?"

Not wanting to be outdone, the \$1 says, "I've seen the whole country as well - going from church to church to church."

The \$100 asks, "What's a church?"

Benediction:

Somebody has well said that there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good morning, Lord," and there are those who wake up in the morning and say, "Good Lord, it's morning." I send you forth to be that first kind of person, because you have heard the Good News of the love of God, a God who inspires true joy in living each day.