

Easter 2  
St. Stephen's, Belvedere  
23rd April 2017  
The Reverend Richard Schaper

## No Second Hand Religion

What is Easter?

Easter is the historic annual celebration of a love that is more powerful than death. This timeless reality is expressed for us Christians in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Are you afraid of dying?

Easter--that is celebrated annually on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring equinox in the Northern Hemisphere—is the proclamation of a love that is more powerful than death.

What is Easter?

Easter is the annual celebration that our beloved dead are not dead; they are instead still with us. Indeed, they are closer to us than we are to ourselves. This is because those who have gone before us live with the God who himself lives in the depths of our hearts, at the core of our being.

So, what IS Easter?

Easter is the story told in the holy gospel according to St. John, the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter—which we have just heard proclaimed to us.

The way that the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter of the gospel according to St. John begins is the words: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark....” And it goes on to tell the story of Mary Magdalen coming to Jesus’ tomb in the dewy darkness of that second morning after the death of Jesus, of finding the tomb empty, of her beholding a vision of angels, of her at first mistaking the Risen Lord for a gardener, then recognizing him when he calls her by name... Mary runs to tell the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!” Mary Magdalen thus becomes the first apostle of the resurrection, and thereby the founder of the church.

You recognize this story as the portion of the gospel that was proclaimed last week-- as it is each Easter morning in Christian communities throughout the world.

Today, the Second Sunday of Easter, the our proclamation picks up this narrative again and continues: We pick up the reading of John, Chapter 20, now at verse 19, which begins: “When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week....”

Do you get it? It’s still that first Easter—in last week’s reading it was morning of the first Easter, but now today in our reading, it is evening of the same day. A week has passed for us, but not for the disciples in the story. For them, it was just this morning that Mary came crying to her with her shocking announcement: “I have seen the Lord!” The doors are all locked because they are afraid that the religious authorities who had Jesus killed will do the same to them.

Although the doors are locked, of a sudden, Jesus is there among them. “Peace” is what he says to them: “Peace be with you.”

Lest there be any mistake that he is someone other than Jesus, he shows them his wounds—his hands and his side. For the Risen Lord, his wounds are his credential, the incontestable evidence how much he loved them. Again he says: “Peace be with you.”

Then he breathes on them the breath of life that is in him, saying “Receive holy spirit”—the inner capacity, if you will receive it, to forgive those who sin against you. This is how we enter into the peace that Jesus grants us—by forgiving those who sin against us, instead of trying to hold their sins against them.

But when the Risen Jesus shows himself to his disciples on this Easter evening, at least one of the remaining disciples is missing: Thomas is absent, AWOL—“Absent

Without Leave.” And when his fellow disciples tell him later that “we have seen the Lord,” Thomas will not accept it and replies: “Unless I see it for myself—unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the mark of nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe!”

And now in the gospel narrative the scene shifts. Verse 19—today’s gospel reading-- begins with: “A week later.” Now it is today—a week after Easter. The disciples are again gathered

together—just as we gathered last week on Easter and now gather again on the Sunday after Easter—and they are in the same place: but this time, Thomas is among them, and unbidden Jesus appears, and immediately confronts Thomas: “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” Thomas does so and exclaims: “My Lord and my God!”

For Thomas, this is what authenticates his faith in Jesus. He needed to have a direct, personal encounter with the Risen Lord in order for him to truly believe.

I wonder how it is for us...? What do you need to believe?

What I like about the disciple Thomas in this story that we’ve just heard, is that he will not accept second hand religion. When his fellow disciples proclaim to him, “We have seen the Lord,” Thomas’ response is to say: “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 pierced side, I will not believe.”

Thomas will not take it on the word of others—not even on the word of his brother disciples.

You are familiar with the expression, “Don’t be a doubting Thomas!” And it is true that Jesus will tell him: “Do not doubt but believe.” But Jesus says this to Thomas only AFTER Jesus has already invited him to “put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side.” -- At which, Thomas responds: “My Lord and my God!”

What do you need in order to believe? We have just heard what Thomas needed. What do you need to believe? This is a question that only you can answer.

We all, it seems to me, begin with second hand religion. What I mean by this is: that we have to learn it from someone. We have to pick it up from somewhere. Even though the impulses of religion lie deep in our souls, these impulses need to find some way to express themselves and typically this has to come from outside ourselves, from an ambient culture of piety and belief.

Someone after all taught you to pray; most likely you did not invent praying ex nihilo. . Perhaps it was your mother, or someone else, who taught you to put your hands together, to bow your head, to say certain words: “Now I lay me down to sleep,” “God is great, God is good,” “Our

Father who art in heaven,” “Hail Mary, full of grace.” Whatever the first prayer words were that you were taught, you learned to repeat them.

But at some point in your spiritual journey, you discovered the difference between merely repeating the words and actually praying—that is, the difference between imitation and actually tuning in to the presence of the One to whom your words were addressed, the One in whom we live and move and have our being.

But to begin with, someone had to teach you. Perhaps there was someone who you could imitate.

I was fascinated when Anita and I visited Shanghai in China, to see how at the impressive and historic shrine of the Golden Buddha, the people in this officially communist nation were offering their devotions to the image of the Buddha. There were very old people, and quite young people, and not many from the generation in between. The old people—almost all women—were unselfconsciously going about their prayers, lighting their incense, waving it about in a certain pattern, placing it before the image of the Buddha, and then bowing and moving their hands in a ritual pattern. I noticed that some in the younger generation were closely observing the aged women making their devotions, and then seeking to imitate them—as if they detected something in the lives of these aged that they lacked in their own lives and were hungering for. And so they were seeking to learn from them in the same way that most of us learn in the beginning—by imitating them.

So we all begin, I would say, with religion that is second hand—that is handed on to us by someone else.

We begin there—but we do not want to stop there. For our religion to become authentic, it needs to be forged in the depths of our own hearts, through the heat of our own longing or suffering, in the wonder and silence and inner agonies that life may bring to us. And in the seeming magic of whatever mini-epiphanies God may offer us along the way of our pilgrimage on earth.

I believe that you know what I refer to by these “mini-epiphanies” because from time to time I hear you confess to your own—a visitation, or a vision, or a dream, or a felt presence, or a glimpse of a certainty that is beyond doubt. These are the experiences that help to anchor and give confidence to faith and authenticate what we read in the scriptures. This the sense in which it is true that ultimately faith is caught, not taught.

So as we mature in faith, when we say, “Christ is Risen!” we do so because like Thomas we have encountered Jesus ourselves. And one place that we encounter the Risen Lord is in the breaking of the Bread and the sharing of the Cup—just as Jesus promised.

In my previous congregation there was a couple who sang in the church choir that had a young son named Paul who normally during worship sat in the congregation with an adult friend of his parents. On Good Friday, the parents were going to leave the child at home with a baby sitter but he begged them that he be allowed to go to church with them even though it was in the evening. During the dramatic retelling of Jesus crucifixion, the lights in the church were gradually extinguished until the congregation departed in silence and in the dark. When Paul’s father went in to kiss his son goodnight as he lay in his bed, he realized that his son was sobbing. “What is it, Paul? Why are you so sad?” “They killed him,” Paul said between sobs “They killed Jesus.” Paul’s father took this in and then assured him: “Yes, son, they did kill Jesus. But this is not the end of the story. Because 3 days later, when Mary came to the tomb, she saw that Jesus’ tomb was empty—and then she saw Jesus alive with her own eyes. Jesus rose from the dead.” As young Paul heard this, his eyes got very big—and then he started to get out of bed. “Paul, where are you going?” his father asked. “We’ve got to go and tell the people that Jesus is not dead—He’s alive. Jesus is alive!”

Now you’ve been told: Jesus is alive!

Go and prove it to others.