

Acts 2:14a, 22-32 Pastor Bill Uetricht 2 Easter 5/01/11

Last week after Sunday's 10:30 service, Joni Norwood, one of our soloists for the day, told her step-mom, Janine, that she was overwhelmed by the experience of watching our people come forward for communion. Now I know that last week there were an amazing number of people here at 10:30, and I know that Joni comes from a tradition in which communion is celebrated in a very different way than we celebrate it. But I have to say that I resonate with her in the sense of awe that she experienced as you all came forward to receive the body and blood of Jesus.

Now I know that some of you like it when you kneel around the altar to receive communion. And I appreciate that; I really do. There is something about humbling ourselves in the presence of God that is so right and appropriate. But when you come down in that line I am reminded of the constant flow of Christian history, the on-going character of the faith. It's as if you, broken and whole, are placing yourselves in that flow. It is quite overwhelming to me. As I stand in the front, I think of you—your story, your pains, your joys—and I think also of all of those who have gone before you. I think of communities of faith that I have been a part of before. I think of folks I never knew, folks who lived a long time ago, whose ideas reformed the church and whose witness made sure that the faith would be passed on to the next generation. As I watch you all come forward, I am reminded that, as Sonny and Cher sang years ago, the beat goes on. The faith continues to flow.

This past week as I confronted the second part of Peter's Pentecost speech from the book of Acts, I was reminded of the on-going character of the faith. Peter's words really are quite brutal:

“Israelites, listen to what I have to say. Jesus, a man whose great deeds and power were experienced by you, you put to death, an action, by the way, that was not absent of the purposes of God. You tried to snuff Jesus out. You tried to kill the movement. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because ‘it was impossible for him to be held by its power.’”

Impossible to be held by the power of death! I am intrigued by that line. Could it be that death couldn’t hold him down because God is the author of life and in Jesus we experience true life? Life couldn’t be extinguished. Life is what in the end, as I said last week, wins. It’s impossible for it to be snuffed out. Human beings may want to snuff life out. They may want to extinguish it within you. You may even want to extinguish it within yourself and others. But you cannot. God raised Jesus up, having freed him from death. Life, in other words, goes on, and on, and on!

Peter’s speech in Acts today is part of the address that he makes on Pentecost day to all the Jews who are gathered in Jerusalem for that great festival. The overall point of the speech involves interpreting what has just happened in Jerusalem where a sound like the rush of a mighty wind came upon all those gathered and where tongues of fire rested on the heads of each person. This was the arrival of the promised Spirit of God. Peter’s speech is a sermon attempting to make the newborn church ready for the implications of the arrival of the Spirit. Jesus was crucified. God raised him up. God exalted him. And now the Spirit comes so that the story of the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus may continue. The Spirit is given so that all of us can be witnesses to the Jesus story. The Spirit has made us witnesses to

the God who raised Jesus from the dead, the God in whom life is always the final word.

Do you get it? **We** are a part of this story. **We** are a part of the on-going work of God. The story goes on and on and on, in part through us. We are a part of the endless flow of Christian history, endless flow of faith. Confirmation students, this is big stuff. Natalie, Allison, Madison, Brenna, and John: this faith journey is no small matter. And you are privileged to be a part of it. Through you and your witness the story is passed on and on and on.

Now it's true. You and I aren't a part of the original twelve, those who got to see Jesus. We aren't a part of those who experienced him as being alive. But trust me; we are in great company. The people of faith of every generation have relied on the witness of others. The Gospel of John seems to know this. He pictures all of us in the character of Thomas. He, one of the twelve, wasn't there, when the raised Jesus was first experienced. In many ways, Thomas is like all of us. He does, however, get the chance to see Jesus, but when he is given the opportunity to put his finger in the side of Jesus and see his hands, Jesus says to him: "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Jesus in John is talking about us. We are blessed in our believing, blessed in our trusting that life is bigger than death, that indeed in Jesus we experience what life is all about. We are blessed for believing even though we do not see. And through our believing, through our witness, the story goes on. The Spirit continues to breathe life into a world that knows too much death.

Note what the breath of the Spirit means to his disciples in our gospel lesson for today? When he breathes on them with holy breath, he says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." The gift of the Spirit to the church doesn't bring a committee, a task force, a dinner, or a trip to Craig's Cruisers. It brings forgiveness, that which truly can bring new life out of death. It is our sin, our messed-upness, our brokenness that continues to bring death to us. The church's on-going task is to bring the forgiveness of God over and over again to a broken and hurting world. Death doesn't rule. Forgiveness reigns. Of this we all are witnesses.

I've got to speak from the heart today. Sometimes people see this faith stuff as a matter of going through the motions. Sometimes they see it as something that is worth an hour or so of their time during the week. Sometimes they view it as a nice thing to consider when they don't have much else to think about. Sometimes they consider it something that makes them do nice and moral things once in a while, something that maybe they ought to do more often.

I've got to repeat what I said before. This faith stuff is big stuff. The gospel writer John says that he has told his story not because he wants his readers to give an hour's worth of time a week or because he wants them to be nice and moral, not because maybe if they don't have anything else to do they might reflect on his words. No, he has written his story because he wants us to believe that in Jesus we meet what life is all about, that in Jesus we are given a life that truly matters. John wants us to have a life that truly matters. The faith is passed on from generation to generation so that we might have a life that truly matters, a life that is infused with forgiveness, a life that is about life,

not death, a life that bears witness to the One whose story goes on and on and on, whose story even death could not contain.

This is why we are here week after week for worship. This is why week after week we gather around the Bible. This is why week after week we teach confirmation to middle schoolers. The story goes on. You are a part of it. We want you to know that. We want you to have a life that matters. We want you to come to trust that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through such trusting you have life in his name.

Get in that long line not only today but over and over again, joining the faithful of every time and place, who even though they haven't seen still believe. Get in the line. Come forward and meet life that truly matters. Come forward and be an active part of the on-going story of God.