

April 16, 2023

Pr. Steve

Texts:

Hymn 490. Just open the hymnal--we're not going to sing it. And I'll just read it, you can follow along, just the first verse.

*Let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand
Christ our God to earth descending comes
Full homage to demand.*

In the presence of great wisdom, Keep Silent.

I thought today to do a brief summary of the Church Year thus far. How do we end up talking about a fellow named Thomas, the Doubter? Just using John's Gospel (and don't be afraid), starting at the beginning of the Church Year, Christmastime--one of the best of the year, right? High feast days—we love it!

In John's Gospel, no Christmas story, no reference. Why? Because John is saying, *'If you want to understand what this faith is about, you have to go back before the beginning of the beginning.'* We have to go back before the beginning of time, and the Cosmos, and the Big Bang. We're going back before to learn of that Word, who was God, who was with God from before the beginning, in whom all things came into existence. This Word is the light and the life of all people. *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never overcome it."*

That Word became human flesh and blood. Stand in awe—even if we don't get it. Stand in awe—what an audacious claim to reality!

First [there is a] sort of preface, fun story in John's Gospel. Next is the Wedding at Cana, abundant, overflowing love, celebration and joy, and good wine! Any objections? This is what it is to be in God's presence. What if that were the reputation of the Christian Church? *'That's the place where they're always celebrating life!'* Instead, what we've got is God, the demonic accountant. (How many sins this week, Arlene? Why doesn't she stop?) No, God is the affirmation of life for all of us: celebration, healing, blessing.

And then the first pivotal story—the Cleansing of the Temple. Now in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's the last story before Holy Week and Jesus' death. John places it at the beginning. What? The Cleansing of the Temple is not only that sacred space—it's the symbol for the cleansing of the cosmos, and all the contractual deals that people are constantly making with themselves, making money--whether it's off of religion or each other, and exploitation--is driven out, so that, friends, as you read the whole Gospel of John this week, remember that all the stories you are

reading are that cleansing--that clearing out--of Jesus, going on and on in every situation, clearing it out to make everything new.

Then, three stories from Lent: *The Woman at the Well*. Jesus says, "If you only knew who's asking you for a drink, you'd ask me for a drink--of that Living water." Always the hidden connection, the inner spring, the inner fountain—having our hearts focused on that--is what the Gospel's about.

Then with the *Blind Man*—the authorities say, 'Who gave you sight?' He says, 'I don't know. I wish I could see him.' Jesus saw him, and later the blind man now went looking to see and search encounter Jesus. That inner connection.

And finally, *Lazarus*, whom Jesus goes to raise from the dead--but when he arrives, Jesus (as the text says) spills his guts in grief. Does that sound like some sort of passive master of spirituality who isn't affected by anything, and now is free of it all?? 'Watch me'. Spills his guts--it breaks him—the loss of his friend. And as he brings him [Lazarus] out of the tomb, Jesus is yanked into the tomb. That is the price he pays because the authorities said 'No more' and they made plans to kill him. That's a pretty heavy price to pay, don't you think?

Holy Week-- This is the celebration of innocent suffering, and that is the most baffling experience for us human beings. The children at the border, still in cages--all these years later, they're still there... Their lives are demolished. Women in Iran, the people in Afghanistan, people in Ukraine, around the world; our own impoverished citizens unable to get healthcare in this country.

Congratulations! I learned this week we're now 40th in mortality rate in the world! The most provident, exceptional nation in the history of humankind, and we're 40th in the mortality rate! It's time to clean house. Innocent suffering, when there's no reason, undoes us.

In the Orthodox Church they sing this song, a Troparion: '*Christ has trampled down death by death.*' That's the celebration of Easter morning. Death itself has been trampled down. Resurrected love is to fill our lives with the universe. That requires opening a lot of space in our own hearts, doesn't it?

The disciples didn't get it. Easter evening, behind locked doors, terrified. Jesus shows up, breathes on them (as God comes to breathe life into Adam and Eve), and says, '*Peace be with you.* 'There is no way to peace. [Congregation] 'Peace is the way'.

He breathes on them a second time and says, '*Peace be with you!* 'There is no way to peace.' [Congregation] Peace is the way!' Christ wants to inhabit us—us. And that's the most difficult thing about the faith—us.

Well, Thomas wasn't there. He says, *'You're not going to make me believe that—until I see the real deal, and touch my hands in his side.'* Now Thomas has gotten a bad reputation for being 'The Doubter. It's not all bad. Too often doubt in our time, though, means sophistication. It blocks