

“Testify”

New London UMC

Worship on April 7 & 8, 2024

John 20:19-31; I John 1:1—2:2 *NRSV*

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What I find interesting in both of today’s readings is the tension between faith and sin. As the readings progress, we are invited along to consider what we understand about our own faith and sin.

The reading from the Gospel of John presents at least ten of Jesus’ disciples in a locked house. According to this gospel the disciples had already heard Mary Magdalene testify to seeing the risen Lord. But did they believe her? Did they expect – or hope – to see Jesus for themselves? . . . It seems to me that they were more than a little surprised when Jesus appeared among them. Especially since the doors were locked. But Jesus offered them peace; breathed the Holy Spirit on them; and commissioned them to go for him to forgive or retain sins. . . . So, WOW! That sounds like a lot to hand off to these disciples who are afraid to leave the house. Did Jesus expect the Holy Spirit to help them discern which sins to forgive, and which sins not to? Because to me it sounds like the disciples were given some serious power here. And we know that human beings don’t always use power wisely, or appropriately, so what kind of risk was Jesus taking handing this power to each of these disciples? Or did Jesus expect the whole GROUP to decide together which sins to forgive, or not forgive? I get the feeling that they might have needed a longer conversation about this than what has been recorded in the Gospel of John. But still – what an experience for them! That the risen Lord had entrusted them to do this! And yet . . . these are the very same disciples who could not convince their friend and fellow disciple, Thomas, that they had seen the risen Lord while he was out.

Sadly, a week later they were still there in the house – as if nothing had changed, as if they had not received the Holy Spirit directly from Jesus, as if their risen Lord had not sent them to carry on his work, his ministry. So there they were in the house, along with Thomas, when Jesus appeared among them once again. And Jesus invited Thomas to not doubt but to believe. Thomas responded by saying: “My Lord and my God!” Then 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.” And then verses 30 and 31 echo this message by stating that these encounters with the risen Lord were written down so that others “may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” **Believing** is what matters. Because we put our faith in what we believe to be true and sure. The opposite “proof” of this is that we don’t have faith in someone or something that we can’t trust or believe in. So if we can come to believe in Jesus, and believe that we will have life in his name, then these beliefs are what we will put our trust and faith in. These beliefs are what will feed our faith and help it to grow.

And as our reading from the Gospel of John ends with the emphasis placed on believing, the same emphasis on believing starts our reading from the First Letter of John. The

writer begins by endorsing and affirming the immediacy of belief based on what the first disciples directly saw, heard, touched, and experienced – but then shifts to explore how faith grows from there in the fellowship of all believers, and in fellowship with God and Jesus. Why was this important? Why did the writer emphasize this so heavily? Because there needed to be a way for people beyond the first disciples to come to believe in Jesus, to experience fellowship with Jesus and God, and to continue to grow in faith. Otherwise there would be a very limited pool of believers whose fellowship would last for one generation and then be done – because they were the only ones who had heard what they had heard, and seen what they had seen, and touched what they had touched. And if only that kind of first-hand experience would be sufficient for belief – well, too bad, so sad for the rest of us. But the good news that those first disciples received and experienced compelled to widen the circle of fellowship through their testimony. And their testimony and the circle fellowship connected with new generations of believers. Which IS clearly good news for us, and for generations to come, because we can still hear their testimony and come to believe and be welcomed into this circle of fellowship.

The message that they heard and proclaimed is this:

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. . . . But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 1:5b-8, 2:1b-2 NRSV)

And here we run into the sticky wicket of sin once again. If we define “sin” as being whatever separates us from fellowship with God and Jesus, and the fellowship of all believers, then we know we will probably never be far from sin. Of course, sin can also lead us into self-deception, which can lead us to believe that we’re not **REALLY** sinning! (Are we? No! Of course not!) That’s a pretty slippery slope, isn’t it?

I’m giving you a copy of a prayer by Bernard of Clairvaux who lived from 1090 to 1153. He was canonized by Pope Alexander III only twenty-one years after his death, and is venerated as Saint Bernard. He was an abbot, mystic, co-founder of the Knights Templar, a major leader in the reformation of the Benedictine Order through the Cistercians, and a big advocate for the crusades – particularly convincing many to participate in the Second Crusade which was notably unsuccessful. . . . But in this prayer, starting at the fourth line, Bernard names the post-Easter tension that we live in:

*Now at Easter You tell us that we have died to sin.
Yet, if this is so, how can we remain on earth?*

*How can we pass over to Your risen life, while we are still in this world?
Will we not be just as meddlesome, just as lazy, just as selfish as before?
Will we not still be bad-tempered and stubborn, enmeshed in all the vices of the past?*

In essence Bernard asks: Are we not still humans who will sin again, and again, as long as we live? . . . And the answer is: YES! But as the writer of First John tells us:

If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. (1 John 1:9-10 NRSV)

To stay in fellowship with God and Jesus and all believers we need to:

Recognize our sin.

Repent and confess our sin.

Receive forgiveness.

Keep trying to walk in the light as we follow Jesus.

May God help us, and help us to help each other, to do this. Amen.