

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year C

April 25, 2010

Acts 9: 36-43, Psalm 23, Revelation 7: 9-17, John 10: 22-30

Acts 9:36-43

{36} Now in Joppa there was a disciple whose name was Tabitha, which in Greek is Dorcas. She was devoted to good works and acts of charity. *{37}* At that time she became ill and died. When they had washed her, they laid her in a room upstairs. *{38}* Since Lydda was near Joppa, the disciples, who heard that Peter was there, sent two men to him with the request, "Please come to us without delay." *{39}* So Peter got up and went with them; and when he arrived, they took him to the room upstairs. All the widows stood beside him, weeping and showing tunics and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was with them. *{40}* Peter put all of them outside, and then he knelt down and prayed. He turned to the body and said, "Tabitha, get up." Then she opened her eyes, and seeing Peter, she sat up. *{41}* He gave her his hand and helped her up. Then calling the saints and widows, he showed her to be alive. *{42}* This became known throughout Joppa, and many believed in the Lord. *{43}* Meanwhile he stayed in Joppa for some time with a certain Simon, a tanner.

Psalm 23

{1} The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. *{2}* He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; *{3}* he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake. *{4}* Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff-- they comfort me. *{5}* You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. *{6}* Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long.

Revelation 7:9-17

{9} After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. *{10}* They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" *{11}* And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, *{12}* singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." *{13}* Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?" *{14}* I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. *{15}* For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them. *{16}* They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat; *{17}* for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."

John 10:22-30

{22} At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, *{23}* and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. *{24}* So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." *{25}* Jesus answered, "I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; *{26}* but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. *{27}* My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. *{28}* I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. *{29}* What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand. *{30}* The Father and I are one."

I want to begin with a little “pet peeve” of mine regarding something in today’s Gospel reading. In the Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark, the religious opponents of Jesus were customarily described as “Scribes”,

“Pharisees”, and “Sadducees”. They were part of the religious establishment and/or Temple bureaucracy of the time. In the Gospel of St. John, the unfortunately translated term, “the Jews”, fulfills the same function. I say “unfortunately” because the Greek word (*hoi Ioudaioi*) is better rendered as “Judeans”. In John’s Gospel, they were the members of the religious establishment who constantly tried to thwart Jesus and His mission and ministry. The author of St. John’s Gospel certainly did not mean “all Jewish people”, nor does that term refer to Jewish people today.

If many of the Bible scholars are correct, and I believe they are, the Gospel of St. John (like all the other writings in the New Testament), reveals quite a bit about what was happening in and to the community for which it was written and from which it emerged. After the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, struggles arose among various surviving groups within Judaism for dominance and to define “true” religion. These arguments could get ugly and eventually those who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were “excommunicated” from many of the synagogues and were becoming increasingly separated from other Jewish people. It was an isolated, besieged, beleaguered, and somewhat defensive community. This is apparently what happened to the community for which St. John’s Gospel was written.

That being the case, they seemed to take every opportunity they could to prove that they, and they alone, were the “true Israel” and the authentic inheritors of the Jewish faith and tradition. To do that, they would “slam” those who differed from them within their texts, such as “the Jews”. In today’s Gospel it is relatively clear that if “the Jews” could not and did not see that Jesus was the one and true Messiah, it must be that they are being stubborn, obstinate, or even have rejected God or been rejected by God. They were “outside the fold”.

What can we learn from all this? DON’T DO THAT. These days, people have all kinds of reasons for not seeing things the way we do—some good, some, bad, some indifferent. We should begin by assuming the best, not the worst of those with whom we disagree or who disagree with us, particularly in matters of religion. Don’t “demonize” the “other”. Not to belabor the point, but no less than the Roman Catholic Church, during the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s (the one that sought to have the Church engage the modern world), stated in one of the documents that sometimes it is the Church itself (that would be all Christians, not just

Roman Catholics) that gets in the way of people seeing the face of Jesus or presence of God in the world.

Think about it.

Anyway, in “Church time” or, as we “pros” like to call it, the liturgical calendar, the season of Easter is a full fifty days. For the past two Sundays we have, in a sense, been able to linger for a while and bask in the glow of the Resurrection. We’ve heard the beautiful and poignant stories about surprising, unexpected, and always undeserved encounters with the risen Lord Jesus. I’ve liked that.

Beginning with this Sunday, however, it certainly seems that there is a lot more difficulty connecting the assigned Bible readings directly to Easter. The connections, if any, are fuzzy at best. As I said on Easter Sunday, just like those first disciples, we are not being encouraged to spend a whole lot of time and energy at the empty tomb. Instead, the clear message of the Easter stories is to “go”, “get on with it”, “hit the road” “You’ll figure it out along the way.”

In my preparations for this sermon, I came across one question and one statement about two of the readings that prompted my own question. I believe this question actually runs through all of the readings we heard this morning (though that generally isn’t the case and as a rule a preacher should not usually attempt to “bring in” all the readings each Sunday). The question I found was in relation to the Gospel reading: How do we live in a dangerous, unpredictable, and frightening world? The statement was about the reading from the book of *Revelation*: it is “a longing of people for God to intervene in human history and to right all wrongs.”

Based upon those, here’s the question I came up with: What do we do when God fails to live up to our hopes and expectations? What do we do when God disappoints us?

Those who confronted and questioned Jesus on that bleak winter day apparently had other ideas about what God should be up to and who God should send to do those things. They lived in a country that groaned under Roman occupation and longed for rescue and freedom. The Messiah they wanted and expected was to be a warrior king, a conquering hero, who would oust the enemy and make things “like they used to be”, or perhaps even better. Based on what was happening to them and their country, such desires, hopes, and expectations were certainly understandable, if not even legitimate to a certain extent. Could you blame them?

For as strange as Jesus' answer to them was (as were most of Jesus' answers in St. John's Gospel), He was right on target. Here's my paraphrase: *There's obviously nothing I can say or do that would make much of a difference since you already seem to have made up your minds and have figured everything out. Try this--try looking at things a bit differently. Change your perspective. You might have to let go of some of your own expectations. Listen more closely to what is going on all around you and try to hear the voice of God within it.*

Most of you know by now that I'm not a big fan of the book of *Revelation*, especially because all of the weird images and "code language" make it very bizarre and difficult, if not impossible for modern folks to understand. In addition, there are many in some of the churches who twist the message into an "end time road map" or puzzle.

Despite my reservations, here's what I do hear in today's second reading. First, in the midst of a sometimes unpredictable and unfair world, *worship* is one of the ways through which we see an alternative vision and hear an alternative message. In the book of *Revelation*, to worship was to participate in an act of defiance against a world that seemed to have gone mad. When you're not sure you understand or even like what you think God is "up to" in your life or in the world, come to worship. The sermon might be lousy that day, the music might be bad, but hopefully you will catch a glimpse of God's vision for the world and hear the echoes of the praises of heaven. Second, *Revelation never* promises that there will be no tears, suffering, disappointments, or even death. It does assure us that God is always with us and that such things will not have the final word. Third, *Revelation* challenges us about being wary of anyone or anything that promises "quick fixes" and escape from suffering at the cost of truth. It reminds us that there are plenty of competing "voices" out there. If we are having difficulties, perhaps we are listening to the wrong ones.

Finally, stories like the one we heard from the *Acts of the Apostles* this morning make me more than a bit nervous and uncomfortable. The best way to describe the reason is to recount an experience Helen Bogan and I had about six years ago at a conference. The Pastor leading it recounted story after story of incredible and miraculous cures and healings, for himself, his wife, and even his dog. Now this man was very sincere and enthusiastic, but my comment to Helen was: "That just hasn't been my experience of the life of faith." I can say

exactly the same for *this* reading: That just hasn't been my experience of the life of faith. I suspect it hasn't been for many of you either.

Perhaps the best thing we can take from this story, then, is a question and challenge: What do you do when the story *doesn't* end as you had hoped, when things just don't work out, when everyone doesn't "live happily ever after"? Our loved ones die and tend to "stay dead". Illnesses don't always go away or even improve. Depression or some other mental illness lingers no matter how hard we try. After a year of searching, you still can't find a job. How and where do you continue hear the voice of the Shepherd and how and where do you still see signs of life and hope? How do you keep your own frustrations from getting in the way of hearing and seeing what God is up to all around you?

Let us pray. Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, let me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn. Through the storm, through the night, lead me on to the light. Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

(*ELW 773*, v. 1)

AMEN.