

SERMON FOR SUNDAY, MAY 1, 2011
SCRIPTURES: John 20:19-31; 1 Peter 1:3-9
“Whose Truth?”

Second Sunday in Easter

One of the requirements of seminary training, at least back when I was in seminary (back somewhere around the time that dinosaurs wandered the earth) was that every student take at least one CPE course. CPE stands for Clinical Pastoral Education or, to put it in simpler terms, chaplain's training. The course was offered by a variety of accredited chaplains' departments in hospitals and institutions, in which students received training on how to minister to people in times of illness or injury or crisis, or even mental instability. CPE courses come in many shapes and forms. The one that I took was at Deaconess Hospital in Evansville, Indiana, a six hundred fifty bed facility that was UCC related. It ran ten weeks, forty hours per week with about half of our time spent in instruction from hospital chaplains, doctors, nurses, and other staff, and the other half of the time spent working with patients on the various units in the hospital. I was assigned to cardiac unit thirty-six hundred, which meant that I was usually visiting with men who ranged from forty-five to sixty-five years of age or women who were generally eighty years or older.

One afternoon I stepped into a double room to speak to two women, both of whom were in their mid-eighties. During the conversation one of the women began to tell a story about how her heart had stopped on the operating table and how she saw a light at the end of a tunnel. She said that when she went toward the light she saw heaven before her and spoke to Jesus, who told it was not yet her time and sent her back. As the woman spoke, the eyes of her roommate got wider and wider until she blurted out, “I had the very same experience, except that I didn't see Jesus. I only heard a voice telling me to go back!” I must tell you that as a young seminarian I was quite impressed and took both stories in with great interest.

I left that room and walked down the hall to the very next room in which I found a man in his early forties who was recovering from a severe electrocution that he had received while on a jobsite. Man spoke with great animation about his experience, in which his life was saved by a passing state trooper who just happened to witness the accident and gave the man CPR until an ambulance arrived. As I was preparing to leave, this good Catholic man caught me and made one last statement. He said, “Father, (to Catholics I was almost always “Father”) if anyone ever tells you one of those cockamamie stories about seeing a light at the end of a tunnel or seeing

heaven or talking to Jesus or such, don't you believe them. As near as I can tell, my heart was stopped for nearly two minutes; and let me tell you, it was nothing but black!"

I have related this story to confirmands in the past and have asked them this question, "Whose story do you believe? Who was telling the truth?"

Today we have two stories from the Gospel of John, one of which happened without the disciple Thomas in attendance and one with Thomas present. The stories are very similar, yet they are not identical. In the interlude between the stories we find Thomas in total disbelief when he is told of what a good number of his friends experienced. Even though there were several people corroborating each other's description of the events that took place on the evening of that first Easter day Thomas could not accept it. And can we really fault Thomas that much? After all, his friends were telling him that the man that they had all witnessed executed had somehow appeared in the middle of a locked room in physical form, had talked to them and had breathed upon them. Would you, without the hindsight that we all enjoy, have been much less skeptical than Thomas? Of course the second section of the story tells us that Jesus repeated his appearance a week later, and that on the second occasion Thomas was present. Jesus does not breathe his Spirit upon Thomas, instead he offers Thomas an opportunity to touch him, to touch his wounds; an opportunity to experience his presence tactilely. It is an offer that Thomas doesn't seem to take up. Rather Thomas immediately professes his belief, right there on the spot.

Today's gospel reading closes with the two verses that I mentioned last week. Those verses address the dilemma that the first century church found itself facing, as enough time had passed that the eye witnesses to the resurrection were all dying off. Verses thirty and thirty-one are basically stating that the whole book of John was written so that those who had not had the opportunity to experience the risen Christ first hand might yet be brought to belief through the power of the stories told within the Gospel. It is a statement of purpose which has hidden within it something of a plea. "We want you to believe, therefore we are sharing these stories." I find it interesting that this unspoken plea in the Gospel of John becomes a statement of absolute conviction within the letter to the Christian community as we find it recorded in the First Letter of Peter, a letter written possibly within a decade after the gospel of John was completed. The author of First Peter writes, "Although you have not seen him, you love him. Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him." There is no plea here, no questioning, no offering for

the purpose of the bringing reader to the point of belief. No, here we have a statement of rejoicing over the fact that we do believe.

Friends, belief comes in a host of different ways, for us and for those around us; and it comes for a host of different reasons. During our pastor's lectionary study session this past Tuesday Rev. Woody Eddins, pastor of the Simsbury United Methodist Church, noted that belief is something that cannot be learned or gained through knowledge or practice. Belief, especially belief in things like the resurrection of Christ, is something that has to be "discovered". Each of us have or will discover the resurrected Christ in our own very personal way. And each and every discovery that each of us has made or will make will be absolutely legitimate; legitimate for us and for our own lives.

I cannot discover Christ for you, nor can you discover him for anyone else. I cannot teach you to discover Christ nor how to go about discovering Christ, nor can I tell you how you should discover him. The truth of your experience of Christ is your truth and yours alone. It may be similar, it may even seem identical to the experience of another, and that fact does not make it any more or less legitimate.

What I have said to several confirmation classes I now say to you concerning the experience that had on that strange day during my CPE training. I believed the stories of the two elderly women and I believed the story of man in the next room. I believed them all be absolute truth; for each story was the story of a personal experience and each story, in its own way, enriched the faith of each of those individuals.

The Gospel of John was written so that you might believe and, in believing, might have life in Christ's name. It was and is offered as an aid and nothing more. Let us all go out then to discover and even to re-discover the risen Christ, each of us in our own way, so that we too may offer our own assertion as does the author of First Peter that, "even though we do not see him now, we believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy; for we are receiving the outcome of our faith, the salvation of our souls!"

Thanks be to God. Amen.