

Weekly Reading – Monday, April 5, 2010

We're looking now at the lessons for the Second Sunday of Easter, April 11, 2010. It's always useful to remind ourselves and our congregations that Easter is a season not a day. There are seven Sundays, the great 50 days, between Easter and Pentecost. I am waging a low-key, largely unsuccessful campaign to give a measure of the focus to Eastertide that we have traditionally given to Lent. Doing so would benefit the church in at least the following ways: paying attention to the Book of Acts and the early church as we move toward Pentecost (Eastertide is the one time of the year we get a series from Acts); exploring the resurrection's mystery and meaning over a longer time than one Sunday, and paying greater attention to the nature and work of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 5: 27 - 32

As noted above, the Eastertide season is the one stretch of time when we get a series of readings from the Book of Acts. During this season readings from Acts replace readings from the Old Testament in the Common Lectionary. As the church grew in Jerusalem and as the apostles continued the healing, teaching, preaching ministry of Jesus, tensions mounted quickly between the new movement and official Judaism. Those authorities had jailed Peter and John and commanded them to speak no more of Jesus or in his name. One of the marks of the church in Acts is "bold preaching." The order to desist, far from stopping the apostles, seems to spur them on. When challenged by the authorities, the question is one of obedience and whom must they obey. "We must obey God rather than men!" The authorities object to being implicated in Jesus' death, but the point of the apostles preaching (as that of Jesus) was to call Israel to repentance and offer forgiveness and a fresh beginning, not condemnation. Rather than focusing on contemporary Judaism, interpreters should speak of the need of the church today to repent (wake up), be forgiven and be renewed for its role in God's mission. We ought also contemplate what a church that makes a bold witness and preachers that preach boldly might look like today. Often contemporary preaching is anything but bold.

Revelation 1: 4 - 8

This is the first reading in a series from the Bible's final book. In some respects, Revelation is a long wild, worship extravaganza and the language here is the language of worship. John addresses the seven churches of the province in the name of "him who was, who is, and who is to come." In other words, the embrace of Christ is comprehensive and complete, past, present and future. Christ is acclaimed and identified by an array of titles, "first born from the dead," "faithful witness," "and ruler of the kings of the earth." When you factor in the situation of John and the early churches, a situation of dire persecution, all these titles are pregnant with meaning and implication. Then there is reference to the atonement (which may now be preached on the other side of Easter), and to the vocation to which the church has been called, "a kingdom and priests to serve God." In the closing verses, the images

shift to the parousia, or return of Christ. Rather than dismissing this as something that didn't happen, it seems to me better to enter into the experience of those addressed—persecution and suffering—and from that vantage point see the importance of the promise that Jesus is coming, that he is the Alpha, the beginning, and the end, Omega. If you are going to be faithful witnesses when it will cost you, then having a big, bold, cosmic faith, with Jesus as the light at the end of the tunnel, is essential

John 20: 19 - 31

Some preachers and churches heard the first half of this chapter last Sunday, verses 1 - 18, with its two scenes. First, Peter and the Beloved Disciple race to the empty tomb, have different experiences and draw different conclusions; then Jesus meets Mary and gives her the message to take to the others. Now, in this text, we have two more scenes, which complete John's Easter Day four-fold narrative. As in 1 - 18, so in 19 - 31, there is a group scene first, then a one-on-one with an individual, Thomas. Sometimes the one-on-one is so compelling that the earlier scene, which is John's version of Pentecost (no fifty day wait as in Luke/ Acts) is given short shrift. Too bad. It's a powerful scene. The stage for it is set by noting that the disciples were huddled behind locked doors in fear. Ring any bells? There Jesus seeks them, and finds them. He conveys to them his peace, which is not the same peace the world gives. He breathes the Holy Spirit into them, a re-creation story recalling Genesis, and he charges and sends them, "As the Father sent me, so I sent you." The gifts of presence, peace and the Holy Spirit are not possessions to be held for personal or private reasons, but are given for mission. He sends them into the world to continue his ministry. In the second scene Jesus pays a pastoral call to so-called "Doubting Thomas," who you kind of respect (at least I do) for insisting that he will not rely on the word of others, but requires an encounter with Jesus. He gets it. Boy, does he ever. But the real point may be the concluding blessing that Jesus offers to those "who have not seen and yet believe," which in a sense includes all of us. The point, at least in part, is that you don't have to have seen the risen Lord, experienced a personal visit, or touched his wounds. Faith can be born from the word of witness given to us by others. And we who believe today are as close to Jesus as those who believed on that first Easter Day.