

Sermon for 16 April 2023 @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Second Sunday of Easter

Scriptures: Acts 2:14a, 22-32; Psalm 16 (*Response 1*)UM748; 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31

"Signs"

I'd like to say to you, "If you don't feel it's critical for you to do what God Almighty wants, move on!"

This .. being active in this fellowship.. ought to be important enough to prevent that.

Signs of Christ's resurrection are that basic, during these Great Fifty Days of Easter ... the seven weeks between Easter Sunday and Pentecost.

Like Thomas: "Unless I see the marks of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Plain and habit-forming as it is, that's church.

Lent teaches us why we're here. These weeks practice it, like the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. I'm doing this because I have to.

"This man...you crucified and killed," Peter declared.

Last Sunday was exciting enough, and full enough of tension, to be described like that.

Just a little later in John, Jesus will say there will be people who feel they're doing God's work when they kill his friends.

What I'm trying to get across is that this celebration business is weird, for Jesus people.

We don't stop dying when we focus on resurrection. All our training, and practicing, and sharing don't blot out loss or pain.

Something happens, though. Think of what Jesus said about children. "Unless you become as a little child, you ..." how would you put it? You don't get the full picture? You don't know how to act? You don't receive the full blessing?

These signs we talk about after Easter. I read one yesterday. The judge who is in charge of that consent decree the police department is working on with the U.S. Department of Justice says we've turned a corner" .. but "it's not sufficiently sharing that progress with the community it serves ...a vital part of rebuilding trust and repairing relationships." On the same front page of Friday's Baltimore Sun, the Attorney General's report of sexual abuse among the Baltimore Archdiocesan staff "does not include nuns, such as the late Sister Francis Marie Yocum." In response, the Archdiocese has removed her name from the auditorium of Catholic High School.

I'm saying the Easter message we teach and learn from is not a one-act play, any more than our lives of faith are. To gain courage to face loss, to learn more and more how to accept renewal as we soldier on, these are fundamental to our outlook, to our fellowship with one another in the Body of Christ. When we have flashes of delight and renewal, such as went on downstairs at the wonderful breakfast so beautifully presented and shared last week, we know and thank God for the work it involved. Same goes upstairs for the variety of the music and every bit of the liturgy and all the exchanges and interactions. Maybe saying another dimension is involved in coming alive in Christ. Certainly Peter is expressing that in the texts we have for today. So does Thomas.

So I can't say to you, "If you don't feel like you need this, or this is not coming alive for you, I'd like to relieve you of the responsibility it involves." Always, I honestly wonder if my part of your experience hinders your development or reduces your joy. I don't mean this in any self-punishing way, but simply as one who is incompletely developed in loving, as we all are. The signs of growth are thrilling, but the pain of it never leaves the picture. That, as I understand it, is the essence of Christian fellowship. Sadness is overcome, but not in any quick theatrical way just to get the point across in an evening's entertainment. That is what we mean by saying Christ is alive among us. The signs of his presence are flesh-and-blood reality, and as old as we get, we never stop training for greater service and kindness.

I thank God for what we achieved last week. I look forward to growth, in forgiveness, and better acquaintances among us, and hospitality for our community and the strangers yet to come in and test our fourth dimension of spiritual being ...one family, under God, through Jesus Christ.

"My Lord and my God!"

Amen.