

The Fourth Sunday in Easter – Year C
8 May 2022
St. Benedict's Episcopal Church, Los Osos
Berkeley D. Johnson, III

May I speak in the name of the Holy, Living, and Undivided Trinity, One God, now and forever,
Amen.

Happy Mother's Day to all for whom Mother's Day is a blessing, and an acknowledgment that
Mother's Day can bring up some difficult or painful memories/reminders for us as well.

I will confess that as a full-time single parent, I decided several years ago to celebrate myself on
Mother's Day, so that became my way of taking lemons and making lemonade, as it were.

As I thought about preaching today though, and began looking at the lessons, the first thing that
struck me about them was how they all contain these ultimate situations.

Peter restoring Tabitha to life, which harkens back of course to Jesus bringing Jairus' daughter
back to life in the synoptic gospels, has to be seen as an ultimate act for the Apostle.

Then the heavenly vision from Revelation, with the great multitude, robed in white, before the
throne of God, with the Lamb at the center, has to be an ultimate vision, right?

And finally, in the passage from John's Gospel, we have what I would call an ultimate question:
are you the Messiah?

If the Resurrection is our decisive event, and Easter our ultimate season, then the readings this
Sunday really seem to bring it all together, don't they?: ultimate acts, ultimate visions, and
ultimate questions.

But what you can never be sure of - but can often count on - when you accept a preaching assignment, is what may happen in the days leading up to that Sunday that may affect what you are going to say.

And so it is that many of us find ourselves today, on top of everything else that's going on in the world, now struggling with the news that leaked from the Supreme Court this past week, regarding the draft opinion on reproductive rights; and since the Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter of our ultimate concerns - what's protected, prohibited, and permitted, under our Constitution - I guess that's what connects it to the ultimate situations in our lessons this morning.

So even though it's not going to be the focus of my sermon this morning, I see no way not to talk about what's happening, lest the church become completely disconnected from our lives and our lived reality.

And while we don't engage in partisan political affairs or battles in church, we also don't shy away from talking about justice issues that affect us, do we? So, I will take a moment to talk about the Episcopal Church's position on reproductive health.

In doing so, I want to be clear, I am not seeking, in any way, to have the last word, or stifle further dialogue about it; rather, I am hoping simply to open up, or begin the process of that dialogue. This is a deeply personal issue for many of us, and if you want to discuss it further, after the service or down the road, please, by all means, don't hesitate to approach and speak with Caro+, me, or any member of our community who can and is willing to offer pastoral support on this sensitive issue. (pause)

If you don't already know, the Episcopal Church has, since 1967, maintained its unequivocal opposition to any legislation that would abridge or deny the fundamental right of individuals to reach an informed decision about the termination of a pregnancy, and to act upon that decision.

And, in 2018, at its General Convention, the Episcopal Church reaffirmed its position that reproductive health procedures should "be treated as all other medical procedures" and that every individual has the right to make decisions about their own bodies. At the heart of these resolutions and statements is the Church's strong focus on individual conscience.ⁱ (pause)

Since it's not the focus of my talk with you this morning, the only thing I will say about it, from my perspective, is that I am deeply moved, and aligned with, the great multitude of people I love, respect, and trust to know what is best for themselves, their bodies, their personhood, and the personhood of those whom they love – namely, my mentors, colleagues, family, and friends – who are not only devastated by the news that the Supreme Court now has the votes to overturn its own precedent and allow states to abridge their reproductive rights, but who are also justifiably frightened about what the next set of hard-won rights to go might be.

But now, in order to move past that, and re-focus our attention on today's gospel, I suppose I better have something important to share with you, and I believe I do. (pause)

I have offered many times, in vespers, or in other gatherings, where we are studying a particular gospel passage like the one we have this morning, that we have yet another example of Jesus' opponents trying to trap him with his words. But what struck me about it this time is that John has announced, at the outset of his Gospel, that Christ is the Word; so I found it amusing that they are trying to trap the Word with his own words – like that's going to happen!

And of course if Jesus had answered their Messiah question simply and directly, then what would we have had to struggle with for all these thousands of years? The “God said it, I believe, that settles it” bumper-sticker crowd would have their answer, and there would be nothing to wrestle with to deepen our faith.

But of course it’s not a simple yes or no, is it? It’s more nuanced than that. As The Interpreter’s Bible Commentator notes, it’s more of a ‘yes, but not in the way you are thinking or meaning when you ask me that’ which is likely what prevents Jesus from simply answering their question.ⁱⁱ [I incorrectly attributed this to Raymond Brown during my sermon]

But beyond even that seemingly ultimate question, lies the heart of my message to you this morning; and it comes from what I believe is an even more striking part of this gospel passage. Because to me, the ultimate of all these ultimates we have looked at this morning is where Jesus tells them “The Father and I are one.”

If anything can get us past the news cycle: the pandemic, the wars, and rumors of wars, the climate and ecological crisis, the heightened economic anxiety, and the pending Supreme Court decision, it’s this verse.

As Raymond Brown notes [in the Anchor Bible Commentary], this would become a key verse in the trinitarian controversies a couple of centuries later;ⁱⁱⁱ and I will confess, I had never really thought about it that way before; but I suppose it’s true: this verse gives us a basis - a real foundation - for the Trinity; because if Christ and the Father are one, then we’re really two-thirds of the way to understanding or discerning the reality of the Trinity.

And truthfully, it doesn’t need to be any more complicated than that. In fact, I have an amusing story about that from this past week: I was sitting with a 93-year-old hospice patient with pretty

advanced dementia on Friday; her daughter had told me on the phone that morning that her mom's Lutheran hymnal was there in her room, so I looked for it when I got to the facility. What I didn't know though was that, unlike our hymnal, there's all this other liturgical stuff in there; so there I was, flipping through it, and I came across the propers for the Sundays in Easter; so I decided to locate the ones for this, the 4th Sunday in Easter, and offer those to my patient.

Now there were lots of "Alleluia[s], Christ is risen from the dead"... and I'm realizing I forgot to mention, in the midst of all this, that we also have Psalm 23 today, which pretty much stands out as our ultimate Psalm too, right?; but while I was offering these prayers and collects to my patient, she was much more consumed with the strap to the Hoyer lift that she was sitting on; it was sticking out from underneath her in the wheelchair, and she was fumbling with it and wondering what it did and "why is it here?"

So, when I finished with the Shepherd, and the Lamb, and the final "Alleluia, God has raised Christ from the dead," I looked up at her and said "and that's it", and she stopped fidgeting with the strap for a moment and looked up thoughtfully at me and said "it's so simple" and we both laughed; and I thought about that for a moment and said "if only" and then we laughed some more. So for all who think, "oh your hospice work must be so sad," I tell you once again, it's a regular riot out there!

But what do I know? Maybe it is that simple. John has disclosed that Christ is the Word from before all time, and that Word is telling us, simply and plainly, that "the Father and I are one"; and really, how else would or could Peter receive the power to restore Tabitha's life? And if Peter, an ordinary human, just like us, has received that power from Christ, what does that say or tell us about the power that we have received in and through Christ?

As for its historicity, this is definitely, for me, more the Wisdom of the Christ Consciousness being revealed to us - the Christ Consciousness that Matthew Fox spoke of when he was here with us several years ago, right in this space - or, what Marcus Borg came to call the post-Easter Jesus, rather than, necessarily, the words of the historical, human, and pre-Easter earthly Jesus, since nothing like this is really found or recorded in the synoptic gospels.

But whatever its origin or inspiration, this is the Eternal Word, from before all time, revealing to us the truth that “the Father,” - the Creator of the universe - “and I are one.” So we can’t just dismiss or gloss over that, because we actually need to channel that power, that wisdom, and that energy, right into our selves, our souls, and bodies, if we are to steel ourselves for the work we have been given to do, which lies ahead.

And we do that, of course, when we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist, don’t we? - we become, and are, members of that Body – the Body of Christ – inextricably and mystically bound up, and at one, with Christ, and the Father/Mother/Creator, and the Holy Spirit.

And that, my friends, is some pretty heady, ultimate stuff. Amen.

ⁱ From Saint John’s Cathedral, Denver, CO Facebook post 5/6/22

ⁱⁱ The Interpreter’s Bible, Abingdon Press, Vol VIII (1952), p. 632

ⁱⁱⁱ The Anchor Bible, The Gospel According to John (i-xii) (1966), p. 403