

At the Easter Vigil I introduced a theme that I'll continue with today. Our story. I should say, our stories, because we are all of us part of many stories that contribute to our own personal narrative. Our stories make us who we are.

Let's start with the Biblical ones we heard today. The way our weekly readings are arranged now we get to hear good sized chunks of the stories that make up our Christian heritage and faith. And for the Easter season this year we will be hearing a full six weeks of the Acts of the Apostles, the Book of Revelation, and the Gospel of John. This week the three readings fit together quite well because they are all about families of faith, and how they struggled with that faith, and with the outside world.

In John's Gospel we have the close-knit community of disciples locked away in the upper room for fear of the Jews, In Acts we hear Luke's harrowing tales of persecution, trials and imprisonments of the apostles who are trying to spread the Good News. Then there's that wild book, Revelation, in which another person named John, sought to inspire and give hope to the struggling and persecuted churches in the Roman Empire's province of Asia.

Following the best scholarship of our day, all three of these books were written in the last two decades of the first century. All of these writers lived in a world where the resurrected Christ had not yet returned. They expected him soon. St. Paul had been killed (around 67CE), and the Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in 77 CE. And all of them would have been written around the time that Domitian was the Emperor of Rome.

You know I was never one who cared much for history as I was growing up. It always seemed to me to be a matter of memorizing boring names and dates. You may have found yourself nodding off in the last 30 seconds when I started mentioning names and dates.

But as I have gotten older I have come to see history differently. We need to know our history, our story! It's no good to only talk about how the Gospel affects us today if we don't understand how the Gospel was originally received and what the people were going through in their day. Names and dates **can** be interesting...they can help place stories in a framework that bring them to life.

And in the case of Acts, Revelation and the Gospel of John, written at the time of the heavy hand of Rome and the Jewish authorities, persecution is a big theme. But, despite threats and torture the Christians in our stories felt compelled to tell others the Good News.

The reading from the Acts of the Apostles shows our heroes hauled up before the authorities again. I added to our reading this morning because one of what I consider to be the most important parts of this chapter was omitted in our lectionary portion. The Pharisee and respected Rabbi, Gamaliel, made a very wise observation about the Christians and their testimony, "if it is of human origin it will fail: but if it is of God you will not be able to overthrow [it]." (Acts 5:38b-39) So, the men were flogged and released. It would be considered a horrible torture in our day, but at that time, they felt lucky to get off with a flogging. They lived to tell the story of Jesus again in another town.

Our reading from Revelation is part of the introduction of that book where John calls to mind for the seven churches why they are there and who holds them together. Christ loves us, frees us and makes us a kingdom of priests to serve God. That's quite a mission statement for a new little church. But they needed strong words to hold them together in dangerous times.

And finally, this morning, we heard the familiar story of Thomas, part of another struggling little community that isn't sure what will happen with the death of their beloved Jesus and the Jewish authorities out for blood.

But Thomas gets such a bad rap and he doesn't deserve it. We don't remember him as faithful Thomas, or loving Thomas, no those names get saved for other disciples. Thomas is stuck with "Doubting". I think he should be called Truthful Thomas.

Even though we've all heard this passage about Thomas many times, I want to look at it as it fits into our theme of the stories which make us who we are. We know that the disciples were all in the upper room behind locked doors after the death of Jesus. Jesus came and stood among them. He said "peace be with you" and then, then once he showed them his hands and his side, THEN they rejoiced. Did they not believe it was him? Did they not see him until they were able to see the marks on his hands and side? Interesting, detail, and a part of the story that's easy to miss. They too needed to experience Jesus in order to know he was with them.

Jesus then says, "Peace be with you" again. And he breathes on them the Holy Spirit. For John, the coming of the Holy Spirit happens here in the upper room. But Thomas missed all this. He was out. Maybe he had drawn the short straw and was the one who had to go out to get the pizza.

So, imagine you are Thomas and you come back to the upper room, you've got the take-out and do the secret knock to be let in. And then you are bombarded by your excited friends. Guess who was here? Guess what we saw? Jesus is alive! He is risen. They were probably all talking to him at once and I'm sure it sounded pretty unbelievable. So, can you blame Thomas for wanting to see to believe for himself?

Actually, good for Thomas for not just jumping on the Jesus bandwagon and believing in the resurrection just because everyone else was doing it. He told the truth about how he felt. There is nothing wrong with doubt. Where would we be if we never had doubts, or never explored our faith to find the answers to our questions? Alfred Lord Tennyson said, "There lives more faith in honest doubt, Believe me, than in half the creeds." A community that wants to explore those doubts though, needs to know and trust each other, before we feel comfortable asking questions that we might think other people will find silly.

In my experience as a youth minister, I was fortunate to be a part of this coming to trust. It takes time for teens (really anyone) to be willing to express their doubts about faith. But if given time to get to know each other, and when they feel that they are in a trustworthy place, then the floodgates open and I hear everything that they have worried and wondered about their faith. This is where the Bible story can really become our story in a living and sharing of the Gospel.

For one youth group I worked with it began in the attic where we were staying in New Orleans doing Katrina rebuilding.

The discussion started with talk about our dinner that night. We'd been working hard all day, and so everyone had been good and hungry. And we ate dinner at a soup kitchen. These teenagers were not accustomed to eating in soup kitchens, and the lack of a choice of what they could eat made for some unhappy kids. So, up in the attic afterwards they were complaining about having to eat potato soup, pasta casserole and salad. The bad moods brought on some honesty then. "I don't understand what we're doing here anyway," one said. "I don't know why we have to go on a mission trip in order to be confirmed," said another. "Yeah, and what does this have to do with God, anyway. I just want a MacDonald's burger and fries." Teens are sometimes more honest than we adults. Adults on the trip may have grumbled too, but they kept it to themselves.

But then we really talked. We talked about where God was in the soup kitchen and in the building site, and in our exhausting work sheet rocking a house that had been destroyed by water damage. I told them that this was all about experiencing the Holy Spirit in the work we were doing rather than just reading it in a book as we sit around the table at confirmation class. They still weren't sure, but it got them thinking. Then, at the end of our week in New Orleans, the man who owned the house was so overjoyed at how much work we had done that he made us a fried turkey lunch. All the kids were ravenous and declared it was the best turkey they had ever had in their lives. Who knew that deep fried turkey could be so good.

The homeowner hugged each one of us with tears of gratitude in his eyes. The faith comes when each young person realizes that they have been Christ to another person who is in need and who feels hopeless. Or, when someone is willing to be Christ to them. Each, like Thomas, needed to have his or her own experience of Christ. That was their story. What is ours?

I believe that each person's story has in it, in their own way, an experience of Jesus. Somehow Jesus keeps coming into locked rooms saying "Peace be with you."