

No Low Sunday Blues For Me!

The Rev. Ted Pardoe
Grace Church in New York
Second Sunday of Easter
May 1, 2011

Acts 2:14a, 22-32

1 Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

Psalm 16

“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” (John 20:29b) How does that echo across the ages for you from Easter night and a week on to us here today? What a grand resurrection statement. We are beholding together the glory of our risen Lord and responding to his call. And we have fifty days of Easter to do it before our Lord ascends to heaven! “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” So no Low Sunday blues for me! Okay, I can see that the church is not quite as full as it was last Sunday. But look at the abundant good news we are receiving today in all of our Scripture readings. We are all New Testament all through Easter. We are invited to continue and to expand the joy of the glory of Jesus’ resurrection. At the same time, we are able to observe just how the resurrection really got the disciples to kick things into high gear.

The reading from Acts presents Peter exhorting the people of Israel about how Jesus has been raised up by God. He does so just after the Holy Spirit has descended at Pentecost. The author emphasizes how the disciples and other people in Jerusalem have witnessed Jesus’ resurrection first hand. They know this truth. Then in the first Epistle from Peter, we have the disciple, writing from Rome to what were very likely Gentile Christian converts in five different locations around Asia. Their love and joy in Jesus Christ is echoed as taking place even though the listeners have not seen him. That is a situation to which we can most certainly relate.

When I mentioned Low Sunday a moment ago, I did so because I want to additionally locate today within a larger church context for a couple of reasons. Yes. There is an important and most evident focus on Thomas. In the Eastern Orthodox church today is largely known as St. Thomas Sunday. In the western churches, especially the Roman Catholic church today was also known historically as Quasimodo Sunday. Quasimodo refers to the first two Latin Words of an Antiphon for today. The Sunday after Easter was the first time that people who had been baptized were able to take off the white robes that they wore throughout the period during which they were being prepared for baptism. In the same first Epistle of Peter chapter 2, verse 2, the author writes “Like (or in the manner of) newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation.” Just what the newly baptized would be longing for as they began their Christian journeys. Quasimodo, as many of you know, is also the name used by Victor Hugo for the main human character in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

A baby is abandoned in the cathedral on Quasimodo Sunday. Placed on the foundlings bed just inside the entrance of the great structure. Left for public charity. A group of religious women remark on the apparently repulsive shape of the baby setting the stage for the public derision and revulsion expressed by churchgoers and public citizens alike throughout the story. The Archdeacon of Notre Dame, Frollo, takes him in and names him Quasimodo. A cynical reference to the baby not being like or in the manner of other “normal” babies. Frollo is ostensibly a protector of Quasimodo but also his antagonist. He gives Quasimodo the job of bell ringer which makes him deaf adding to his personal challenges. The beautiful Esmerelda, a barefoot gypsy dancer, enters the scene. Both Quasimodo and Frollo are deeply smitten by her

physical appearance and her natural and mystical ways. Yet neither man could ever hope to actually connect with her in a true loving and emotional way. The populace is both allured by her physical beauty and finally angered by her actions which they believe are witchcraft. Esmerelda shows Quasimodo the only act of human dignity that he will ever be extended when she offers him water while he is being flogged in a public pillory. When Esmerelda is initially about to be hanged by order of the king for witchcraft, Quasimodo rescues her and takes her into the cathedral in sanctuary. Frollo betrays Esmerelda and hands her over to death then Quasimodo hurls his ostensible church protector off the cathedral ramparts to his death. At the end, the church has offered no real sanctuary to Quasimodo or Esmerelda and both end up in a mass grave. Notre Dame stands stonily silent as the world shifts around it. Social strife. Class distinctions. Nuanced gender dynamics. Proust and Dickens would borrow heavily from Hugo's groundbreaking novel which reads as such epic theater.

I was drawn to this story on Low Sunday as I thought about an aspect of our gospel passage that often remains in a rear seat compared to the spotlight cast on dear Thomas. The initial action in this portion of John's gospel is with the disciples OTHER than Thomas. "Jesus came and stood among them." He said "Peace be with you" which takes on a whole new emphasis in this setting. "He showed them his hands and his side." "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." No doubts. No questions. No hesitation. The disciples rejoiced.

Jesus says for a second time "Peace be with you." The divine acclamation of God's peace from the risen Messiah. It is the formal prelude to Jesus saying to the disciples and all of us "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." What does Jesus do next? He breathes on them. A direct reference to God breathing life into us humans from the second creation story in Genesis "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life". This is the new creation in God's kingdom. Jesus is staking his claim on our behalf. It was alluded to in the prologue of this gospel. "In the beginning was the Word...What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people." The disciples and we are being commissioned to go out into the world and spread the way, the truth and the life of Jesus Christ as Jesus indeed told the disciples at the last supper. Indeed, after breathing on the disciples, Jesus said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit." Until this moment Jesus has only foreshadowed what would follow him when he was gone. He had promised on more than one occasion that the Paraclete, Advocate or Spirit will follow him and, at the same time, represent Jesus' return to us. Now that he has been crucified, died and resurrected by God he actually gives us the Holy Spirit. Yes. The great descent of the Holy Spirit is well know at Pentecost in the first part of the very chapter 2 of Acts that we heard in our first lesson today. But I do not want to underplay the significance of this gift of the Holy Spirit from the resurrected Jesus in his commission of the disciples and us. Thus ends the amazing day of Easter.

Enter Thomas, our official ambassador of disbelief, again. I mention AGAIN because I think it is important that we recall the two other incidents in this gospel where Thomas has thrown a curve ball to Jesus. The first one took place while Jesus, after being told about the illness of Lazarus, foretells how the illness will not lead to death but to glory. Here Jesus is manifesting his great knowledge from a distance that he can only hope that the disciples might grasp and believe. Any chance of that goes up the chimney as mere pipe dreams when Thomas chimes in yes Jesus indeed "Let us also go, that we may die with him." Thomas wants to witness it all up close and personal.

The second time of doubt by Thomas comes in Jesus' great final discourse at the Passover supper, which he begins by washing the feet of his disciples. An event that we commemorated here during Holy Week in our Maundy Thursday service. Near the beginning of the discourse, Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them and that "you

know the way to the place where I am going.” Cue Thomas! He blurts out “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” To which Jesus replies, ostensibly to Thomas, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life.” (add Father portion as it relates to resurrection appearance?)

Now, shortly after Jesus’ momentous Easter encounter with the other disciples, Thomas is BAAAACK one more time. The disciples, excitedly I imagine, tell Thomas that they “have seen the Lord.” Thomas’ reply? “Unless I see the mark 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.”

Fast forward to Quasimodo Sunday. The disciples, with Thomas this time, are back in the house where they had gathered on Easter night. Once again Jesus mysteriously and gloriously comes among them. He offers the divine greeting once more “Peace be with you.” No further pause. No hesitation on anyone’s part. Jesus says straight away to Thomas “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.” The command from our Messiah to this previously hesitant and doubting disciple. Does Thomas plunge his hand into the side of the risen Lord? Many great paintings depict just such an action by Thomas. Does Thomas defer yet again?

“My Lord and my God!” is Thomas’ beautiful confession. No hesitation. No further dithering about it. Thank you Jesus! “My Lord and my God!” Complete recognition of the risen Messiah’s human and divine existence.

Jesus offers his great beatitude for Thomas and us all. He acknowledges the confession of Thomas because he has seen him and Thomas’ need to penetrate beyond the miraculous has finally been magnificently satisfied. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” As with the reply of Jesus to Thomas’ earlier question about how we can know the way, here too Jesus seems to talk personally to Thomas. But the author of this gospel very deftly holds up these responses as being spoken by Jesus to us all throughout our human history from that moment forward. It is as if we were sitting in a dark theater taking in the historic story and now God has turned up the lights and we are all witnesses to the Lord’s statement “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Right here. Right now.

Jesus has commissioned us all. He has given a command to Thomas and then Jesus received the glorious confession of this particular disciple. Then Jesus gives us all the magnificent faith stirring beatitude. In this knowledge we should be mindful of the lesson offered by Victor Hugo in his great novel about a silent church standing by in the face of social injustice beginning with the least among us, a disfigured baby abandoned inside its front door. We must act on our commission proclaiming loud and clear “My Lord and my God!” In so doing we must also take to heart the poor, the lonely, the oppressed as our Lord did when he walked this earth, was crucified then rose again for our salvation. Strengthen the faithful, arouse the careless, and restore the penitent. Grant us all things necessary for our common life, and bring us all to be of one heart and mind within your holy Church.

AMEN