

“Life After the Tomb”

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 20:19-31

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 20:19-31

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O God,
you raised up Jesus Christ
as your faithful witness and the first-born of the dead.
By your Holy Spirit, help us to witness to him
so that those who have not yet seen
may come to believe in him
who is, and was, and is to come. Amen.

Intro:

Recently, I was talking to my friend Hunter who lives in the holy land ... Memphis, Tennessee. Now, I say Memphis is holy land for a number of reasons, not the least of which is their BBQ. Now, for those of you who are convinced South Carolina mustard base is the best BBQ, please understand that Memphis Tennessee BBQ is a holy thing. But in any case most of us southerners know this fact to be true, it is part of what we call the southern trinity: BBQ, Basketball and the Bible. Memphis is known for their BBQ, especially their ribs. And as my friend who lives there says, "Good ribs would make an angel weep."

Now BBQ is not the only reason Memphis is considered holy land. The primary reason, of course, is because it is the home of the king. Elvis.

Hunter told me the first thing he did when he moved up there was visit Sun Records, where Elvis recorded his first song. He told me in the studio, there was an "X" marked on the floor with duct tape indicating the exact spot where Elvis stood. The tour guide told him that just the week before, Bob Dylan had come into the studio, said not a word to anyone, walked over to

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the "X," got down on all fours, kissed it and walked out. For many, Elvis has reached an almost holy status.

In fact, there has been studies on the parallels between Jesus and Elvis, most notably by the renown scholar (and standup comedian) Adam Sandler. He explains:

Jesus said: "Love thy neighbor." (Matthew 22:39); Elvis said: "Don't be cruel." (RCA, 1956)

Jesus is part of the Trinity; Elvis' first band was a trio.

Jesus is the Lord's shepherd; Elvis dated Cybil Sheppard.

Given that kind of reverence, I believe that we as Jesus fans, have a lot to learn from Elvis fans. Especially in terms of faith....

Like any good pilgrim trekking through the holy land, Hunter went to visit the shrine of Graceland. It's hilarious to hear him tell his experience... he said there was this great welcome sign--a twenty-five foot high Elvis saying "Welcome to the Blingdom!" And after taking some pictures while waiting in line to get in he turned to one of the tour guides and asked, "So, how long did Elvis actually live here?" He said there was a loud gasp from everyone around him and the guide looked him with this face full of shock and whispered, "We don't use the past tense here." Pointed at her t-shirt, which read: "Graceland, where Elvis LIVES."

It didn't matter that she had never actually seen Elvis or that technically Elvis stopped walking the earth over thirty-two years ago. It didn't matter. She didn't care. Elvis fans don't care. Without any proof, they believe he lives! Elvis lives, baby. The King lives.

It's a shame we don't all live our lives with that kind of faith. I'm afraid that most of us tend more towards the disciple Thomas than that tour guide at Graceland.

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Our scripture today is the familiar story of doubting Thomas. There we find the disciples locked up behind closed doors after Jesus' crucifixion hiding from the Jews. And Jesus came and stood among them. When they saw him, the disciples rejoiced. But Thomas was not there at the time.

However, Thomas enters that closed door into a community of faith, but does so courageously openly voicing his doubts. Let's face it: Thomas often gets a bad rap in the Church. Though his story is one of the few in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary that never changes (we always read about his encounter with the resurrected Jesus on the Sunday after Easter), it is often cast in negative terms. He's most famously known as “Doubting Thomas,” the cynic, the holdout. His reluctance to accept the testimony of his fellow disciples, his insistence on physical proof, his late arrival to the joyous belief of his peers— these are often described as spiritual flaws. As signs of stubbornness, or of a weak faith.

But weakness is not what I see in Thomas. I see a man who yearned for a living encounter with Jesus. A man who wouldn't settle for someone else's experience of resurrection, but stuck around in the hope of having his own. A man who dared to confess uncertainty in the midst of those who were certain. Saying to the knowing disciples, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger ... in his side, I will not believe." A man who recognized his Lord in woundedness, not glory.

According to John's Gospel, Thomas had to wait in suspense and uncertainty for a whole week after his friends first told him they'd seen Jesus. What, I wonder, did that week feel like for the disciple who missed Jesus the first time around? Did he pity his fellow disciples for their grief-stricken delusions? Or did he fear (as I so often do) that he'd missed the memo, missed the boat, missed the glory? That he was destined only ever to know God secondhand?

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What strikes me most about Thomas’s story is not that he doubted, but that he did so publicly, without shame or guilt, and that his faith community allowed him to do so. And what I love about Jesus’s response is that he met Thomas right where he was, freely offering the disciple the testimony of his own wounds, his own pain. After such an encounter, I can only imagine the tenderness and urgency with which Thomas was able to repeat Christ’s words to other doubters: “Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet have believed.” Because isn’t this all of us, on the Sunday after Easter? Don’t we all wrestle with hidden doubts, hidden fears? Don’t we all wonder sometimes if the miracle of resurrection will hold true in the Ordinary Time season after Pentecost?

If nothing else, Thomas reassures us that faith doesn’t have to be straightforward; the business of accepting the resurrection, of living it out, of sharing it with the world, is tough. It’s okay to waver. It’s okay to take our time. It’s okay to hope for more. Jesus’s wounds and Thomas’s doubt, the encounter between them is what life looks like after the tomb.

I mean we’ve all heard this story before. More importantly, we’ve all lived this story before. We’ve all had times in our lives where we’ve doubted, where we have said to God, “Show me a sign! Give me some proof!” Maybe it was because we were in a place of unbearable pain, or a time we faced hardship with no answers, a time when God seemed silent. We have all been at that point where, like Thomas, we yearned for a sign from God.

And why not? We live in a world where “proof” trumps faith. We send robots with cameras to the farthest ends of the universe so we can know for sure what’s out there. We won’t believe an assertion until a complicated mathematical equation says it’s true. And anytime--anytime--there is a wall bearing a sign “wet paint,” we will touch it just to be sure.

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If only we could have the faith of Elvis fans, a faith driven not by empirical proof, but by the voice in our hearts. Finding that kind of faith can change our lives. For when you believe something in your heart, you begin to act it in your life.

Look at Elvis fans. They not only believe he lives, they act like he lives. For example, they are constantly looking for Elvis. The Bible says seek and ye shall find. Well, Elvis fans follow that to a tee. They are constantly looking for the King. And, sometimes, they find him. There have been Elvis sightings all over the world--from a spa in Tokyo to a Burger King in Michigan. There was even a woman who claimed that she found the image of Elvis in a taco shell.

If only we'd put even 1% of that kind of energy towards looking for Jesus, we might actually find him too. Maybe we'd find him in the eyes of a little child or the downcast gaze of a homeless stranger. Maybe we'd find him in the face of an enemy or the tears of a loved one with whom we are fighting. If you believe he lives, you'll act like he lives. You'll look for him and you'll find him.

And another thing--Elvis fans believe he lives, so they look for others who believe as well, like through Elvis fan clubs. I heard a story about a woman who was in a fan club called "Taking Care of Business." She had to have major surgery and afterwards received hundreds of cards and letters and donations from "Elvis friends" all over the world. We Christians can learn something from this. Community is what gives us strength, support and focus in times we most need it. Finding families of faith is what helps us keep our faith. If you believe he lives, you'll look for others who believe as well.

Here's a third example, and probably the most important. Because they believe he lives, Elvis fans go out into in the world and share his message. They play Elvis' music; they dress up

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as Elvis impersonators; they decorate their homes with Elvis memorabilia. Whether through word, music, or impersonators, Elvis fans proudly proclaim the message of the King.

This provides an interesting contrast to the disciples. Before Jesus appeared in their midst, the book of John tells us that the disciples were in hiding behind locked doors. They weren't looking for Jesus. They weren't going around looking for other believers. They weren't out in the world preaching the word. They weren't proclaiming the message of the King. They were hidden in fear, locked away in shame because they didn't believe he lived.

I'm afraid that many of us live a similar existence; a life with little or no faith in the risen Christ, our hearts locked up and closed away.

I remember watching a documentary about the 50s not too long ago and obviously Elvis was talked about and a young girl in an interview talked about how she grew up listening to Elvis. Sadly, she lived through an abusive childhood, but she talked about how she used daydreams of Elvis as an escape. She said "He was my safe space, my little corner of heaven." Because she believed he lived, she honored him in her heart and that enabled her to find peace in the hardest of places.

If only we would open our hearts to Jesus in the same way. When we honor the risen Christ in our hearts, we have our own safe space, our own little corner of heaven in which to rest and to heal.

If you believe he lives--you'll act like he lives. And Jesus' message is certainly a message of action. Elvis apparently felt the same way. For Elvis said early in his career, "Music and religion are similar--because both should make you wanna move."

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The gospel is a living, vibrant force that should make us want to get out and move, move around in the world, move towards each other in love and compassion, move towards bringing in the kingdom--or the blingdom--or whatever.

I want a religion that makes me wanna move.

I want a savior that makes me wanna put on a sequin jump suit and sing.

I want to believe in a Jesus that lives.

Don't let the doubts and fears of life shake your belief. Don't let your faith be driven by anything but the voice of your heart. Remember: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." For if we believe he lives, our lives will change. We will search for and find him; we will proclaim his message; we will honor his spirit with ours.

Sometime this week, find a quiet moment, ask yourself, "Do you believe?" From the deepest parts of your heart, the answer will surely come: He lives. He lives, baby. The King lives.

Let us pray:

God of all things good, barbequed ribs, basketball, Elvis and Jesus, ease our troubled hearts and calm our doubts and fears. Bring us faith so that we might act like a follower of your Son, and always, always, whisper daily the words we need to hear in our hearts, "He lives! The King lives." Amen.

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Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.¹

Offertory Prayer

Mighty God of Resurrection Power: You offer us life that overcomes death, light that overcomes darkness, hope that overcomes our deepest despair! What could we possibly offer in return? Our tithes and gifts, yes; but our minds, hearts, and bodies, as well. May our minds be about understanding who you are and who you long for us to be in this world. May our hearts overflow with your love and compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten. May our bodies carry us out of the tombs of isolation to engage our neighbors as sisters and brothers. May the “Alleluias!” we offer leave this place with us to bring hope to everyone we meet! In the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>