

April 11, 2010

## **The Second Sunday of Easter**

John 20:19-31

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

*The Rev'd Geoffrey M. St. J. Hoare, rector*

### **Receive the Holy Spirit**

Have you ever felt really stuck at some point in your life? Felt as though you had no decent options? Perhaps you've been in some sort of a mess with no real idea of how you got there and no real idea of how to get out. You might be stuck in a job you hate but your responsibilities leave you feeling that you cannot risk losing your income at this point in life. Or perhaps you have a friend for whom you care but you know is sucking you into a relationship that is really crazy and you feel trapped. At any rate many of us know that terrible, enraging, impotent feeling that comes with imagining ourselves without options in some aspect of our life. If you are not aware of having felt stuck at some point in your life then give thanks for you are mightily blessed and I am genuinely happy for you.

But the gospel has something to say to us when we feel as though we are without good options in life and it has to do with the church. Today is the Second Sunday of Easter or the Eighth day of Easter, which means that we have forty two days to go until the Feast of Pentecost. On that day we will celebrate God's pouring out of the Holy Spirit, creating what was to become the Church. Well in John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is poured out in the Resurrection. Jesus breathed on the disciples and said to them "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." He conferred upon his disciples the capacity to address the binding and unbinding of humanity or the ability to address those times when we feel stuck.

In addition to being the Second Sunday of Easter, today is also the day of our annual parish meeting at which, among other things, we will celebrate the work of our Strategic Thinking Group and the continuation of its work as All Saints' 2020. They have boiled a lot of conversations down to a point where we can describe ourselves as a worshipping community, growing in Christian faith through engaging God and neighbor. Over time I expect the potentially radical implications of this slightly dry-sounding statement will get worked out to the degree they are consistent with our communal DNA. For this morning we do well to consider what it means to grow in Christian faith. This growth is not measured so much by our ability to give intellectual assent to doctrinal propositions, (although there is nothing especially wrong with our being able to do that!). It is measured more by recognizing our growing capacity to respond to the challenges with which we are presented in life really trusting in God's grace and love, and really knowing in our bones that death is not the last word about what matters. That is Easter faith. When we say "Credo" or "I believe," we might do better to say "I put my trust." I put my trust in God, creator of heaven and earth. Thomas in

today's story is an empiricist. He wants to deal with reality as he experiences it. At first he does not trust the testimony of his friends and cannot quite believe in the power of God over death. You may know the old saw that an optimist sees the glass as half full, the pessimist sees it as half empty and the empiricist sees the glass as twice as big as it needs to be. We don't know exactly what happened in Thomas' heart and mind but we know that Jesus approached even this realist in some way that unbound him and gave him the capacity to trust in God's power and God's love.

When we talk about growing in Christian faith of course we mean learning our Christian story and studying the scriptures and conversing about what really matters. But these things are really means by which we grow in our capacity to put our whole trust in God's grace and love.

Some of you know the work of Victor Frankl<sup>1</sup>, a psychiatrist who was also a survivor of German concentration camps including Auschwitz. He published a book under the cheery title of *From Death Camps to Existentialism* which was later changed to *Man's Search for Meaning*. In the first part of the book he records his almost clinical observations of his fellow captives including the manner in which they faced death. He noted that some people went to their deaths long dead. They had given up. They had no capacity to respond to the degradation they were undergoing. Where others, stripped of clothes, hair, teeth, even their names somehow faced death with courage, concerned for others and claiming their humanity to the last. Frankl called this a 'will to meaning' and thought that what really matters in life is our capacity to create meaning.

Another prisoner in a different war was Vice-Admiral James Bond Stockdale<sup>2</sup> who died in 2005. He was the senior ranking American military prisoner in Vietnam. He was routinely tortured and beaten. He disfigured his face so that he could not be used for propaganda purposes when told that he would be paraded on television. Asked how he managed under such terrible conditions, he is reported as saying that he never lost faith that he would survive, get out and turn the experience into a defining event of his life. He also said: "it was the optimists who did not survive; the ones who said 'We'll be out by Christmas'. Then 'we'll be out by Easter'. Then Thanksgiving would come and go and they would die of a broken heart."

The point here is not doom and gloom unfitting for Easter. The point is that however stuck we may feel, in God's grace we *always* have some choice as to with what attitude we will face the challenges of life.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor\\_Frankl](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viktor_Frankl)

<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Stockdale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Stockdale)

As we grow in faith, so we grow in our capacity to meet those challenges remembering that keeping faith with the source of our life -- the love that made us for love -- is the most important thing. Of course we need not sit by idly and let things happen to us, but in those times when we feel bound or stuck we have a choice. That choice is part and parcel of what we are about because we have received the Holy Spirit and been charged with unbinding that which is bound and bringing good news to those who feel they have no options. Such is Easter life for all of us.

As ever, we continue our response to the gospel in silence and in prayer...