

What's Next?

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April 7, 2024

The Second Sunday of Easter, Year B

1 John 1:1-2:2; John 20:19-31

There are some different ideas about what to call this Sunday, the second Sunday of Easter. Easter is a whole season—50 days of celebrating the resurrection of Jesus, and the new life that we created ones find when we live into his death, resurrection, and ascension. So, officially, this is the Second Sunday of Easter. Unofficially, a lot of people call it “low Sunday”—low because of the level of energy of the clergy, perhaps. And maybe low because attendance on this Sunday is usually not quite as high as it is on the *first* Sunday of the Easter season! My Lutheran friends call it “Holy Humor Sunday” remembering that Martin Luther taught that the best way to defeat the Devil is to laugh at him. Some of my colleagues will be telling jokes in their sermons today—I even know one or two who wear a red, rubber clown nose on this day. I served for a decade with a bishop who insists on calling this Sunday “Momentum Sunday” because he wants us to remember to carry the glory and enthusiasm of last week’s celebrations forward.

I see the wisdom in each of these nicknames, but I call today “What’s Next Sunday.” The reference is to President Jed Bartlet, played by Martin Sheen, on *The West Wing*, one of my favorite TV shows of all time. The acting was witty, the writing was just a little snarky, and it was a seven-year series devoted to the administration of a smart and loving American president. What’s not to like?

In the series, President Bartlet meets with aides and cabinet members and visitors and advisors. He thoroughly considers issues that are presented to him, makes a decision, and then says, “What’s next?” He moves from important issue to important issue, by appreciating the gifts of the people before him, assessing the situation at hand, and taking the next step. And then, he is ready for what’s next.

I tend to watch favorite television shows over and over again. I re-read books, too. Sometimes it is an intellectual exercise, as I try to discover the skill of the writer. Sometimes it is a desire to remain in a comfortable place. Sometimes, it is to wonder if I have learned everything there is to learn from a particular story.

I think that this is what we do in church, Sunday by Sunday with our readings from Holy Scripture. Just last Sunday, we re-read a true story about Mary Magdalene and some friends, women who had watched their dear friend and teacher die. And early on the third day after his death, they went to his grave to anoint his body and cry over their loss. And they found the tomb empty and an angel saying what angels always say, “Do not be afraid.” And, “go tell people what you have seen here.” And then the text ends in a most curious

way. The very last phrase of the Gospel of according to Mark is, *they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

Of course, we know that eventually they said something because we know the story. But that ending of Mark's does make us wonder: "What's next?" What is next for the friends of Jesus?

In today's Gospel from John, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples. And John picks up on the theme of fear. The disciples have locked themselves in—the text actually says, *for fear of the Jews.* And it is important to remember that that this passage is not an invitation to antisemitism. Jesus was a Jew.. His first followers were Jewish. The writer of today's Gospel selection was Jewish.

This passage is about how afraid they were. Jesus had just been put to death for blaspheming against religious law. The disciples were afraid that if things did not quiet down quickly, they would be the next to die. They locked themselves in together because they were afraid of the people who had put Jesus to death. The only thing they could think of was how to protect themselves. And so they cowered in fear behind a locked door.

And Jesus comes in anyway. Now, they don't recognize him at first. I guess they weren't expecting anyone to come in through a locked door. And so, to prove that it is he, Jesus shows them his wounds.

Remember that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine. And wouldn't you think that the divine part of him, the God in him, would heal those wounds? We understand that in Jesus, God was willing to be fully human, even taking on human death. But wouldn't you think he would want some divine healing for those very humiliating human wounds?

But what's next for Jesus in those days just after the Resurrection is helping the people to understand how very good humanity is. Humanity is so good that God doesn't just love us, God seems actually to like us!

We believe that Jesus is God incarnate. That is, in the person of Jesus, a Jewish man living in the first century of the common era—in Jesus, God became a vulnerable human being. God was born (of an un-wed, very young woman, but that is a sermon for another day). God grew in body, having to learn how to walk, and talk, and feed himself, as we all do. And, when faced with being put to death by a combination of unjust political and religious forces, God decided to see being a human through to the very end. He did not leave the dying to his human friends. He did not magic his way out of human trouble. He experienced a painful, humiliating, public execution while his mother watched.

Jesus rises from death, and even then, when it comes time to convince his friends that death does not have the last word, he shows them his wounds—and notice! He does this not once, but twice. Thomas missed it the first time? Okay, Jesus will open his hands and bare his side again!

It is the mystery of the Incarnation: God loves humanity so much that God becomes human in God's own self. And that means that the marks of the nails and the wound in his side—the very things that killed him—are part of who he is. Our God lives with and through humiliation. God doesn't brush the pain away. God takes it on and stands up through it. And if we follow Jesus, we can stand up in our own pain and humiliation and know that we are not alone.

In every post-resurrection appearance, in one way or another, Jesus leads the people to consider, what's next? Not only what's next for Jesus, but what's next for the people? What's next for us?

What is next for us? It's a really good question. And it may be why I like to re-watch and re-read. In the 67 years that I have been asking that question, there have been days when I have a pretty good idea what the next few days or weeks will hold. And there have been days when I haven't had a clue. It was one thing when Thomas asked the question, and Jesus held out his hands and showed the wound in his side. But what do we look for now? How do we who want to live life in God figure out what's next?

There is another question, this one is from the Baptismal Covenant, which we proclaim every time a new follower of Jesus is baptized. Indeed, we will recite it today at the 9:15 service, when baby Sophie joins the Christian family.

“Will you persevere in resisting evil, and whenever you sin, repent and return to the Lord?” What's next in our lives? God has shown us that humanity is good—so good that God stands in the middle of it with us. Humanity is good and God loves us *and* we will fall short again and again. And whenever we get into trouble, whenever we forget the example that Jesus has set for us, whenever we are humiliated and wounded, we get to return to God. Indeed, in the Baptismal Covenant we have promised that we *will* return to God.

And God welcomes us, with open, wounded hands, and wide-stretched arms of love.