

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Second Sunday of Easter
3 April 2016

Scripture readings:

Acts 5:27-32 Psalm 150 Revelation 1:4-8 John 20:19-31

When I encounter this text I always feel gypped, and I suppose if we're honest it's a fair feeling. Not only are we given these extraordinary stories of resurrection from the dead, now after Easter we're given these extraordinary stories of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus and even after the *noli me tangere* - you know that one, don't you? Jesus didn't speak Latin, but the Church did. You remember when Jesus says in the garden "*noli me tangere.*" What does it mean? It has nothing to do with tangerines. [laughter] "*Don't touch me.*" We get these visions of Jesus that are not touchable and then you get all kinds of theologies and philosophies about why he wasn't touchable. But today Jesus is definitely touchable to doubting Thomas who was not only late, he was absent the first time Jesus' body appeared in a locked room. And now the second time there is this ghostly appearance of Jesus and Thomas gets to manipulate a wounded body or, in fact, enter a wounded body - to put his finger in the nail holes and thrust his hand into the bloody wound in the side of the Savior and come to belief about a resurrection which he is able to see and touch.

Wouldn't that make religion a whole lot easier for all of us? Wouldn't it just be easier if Jesus showed up and we could touch him and we knew that he had been crucified? We had seen it - buried, disappeared and then come back to life and walked around with us, appeared in locked rooms and on the beach and fed us fish and appeared to us on the road to Emmaus when we broke bread and we could see and touch and know that the Savior was with us. And I'm sorry - I haven't had the experience. Have you?

And then we face a baptism this morning. It really is worth asking what is this all about? I know, it's to keep grandparents happy. You've heard these expressions in ecclesiastical circles: "*Well, we wanted to get the baby done.*" When Paul and Diane were down we paid attention to this book which was a gift from the Canon from an old city church in Bristol in which the baptismal service is not read. It was bound without it. But we looked up in another book I have - *The Book of Common Prayer*, same date. This was printed in Oxford; the other was printed in Cambridge. Cambridge put the baptismal service in.

Diane was concerned about how soon after birth do you have to have a baby baptized. You recalled your parents' urgency. And the Church has that urgency written into its liturgies. "*As soon as practicable after a child is born that child should be baptized.*" It makes you wonder what the urgency is all about. But, of course, we're smart enough to know what infant mortality rates used to be. And then there were all kinds of cockamamie theological ideas that God couldn't save a child who died unless people had baptized the child. You know that one, don't you? If you don't have a baby baptized and the baby dies, it's going to hell. There are people who know a lot more about that stuff than I do and people who think about those things way differently than both you and I think. And then we're also aware that there exists in our society something called Baptist Churches. They would be appalled at what we're doing this morning. They don't baptize people until they're at the age of cognition, until they know what they are doing. Well, I think it's just fine to have different ideas about things, even things as important as baptism. There are reasonable arguments for doing that.

At the beginning of the Mass Marianne talked about getting confirmed. Well, that's how it sorts out in other churches that do infant baptism. Confirmation is sort of the age of cognition, the age when you make your decision about becoming a faithful member of the Church and it was done at the same time puberty rites were done. And who at that age is ready to make up his adult mind about anything? [laughter] Consider divorce rates if you want to know about adults making up their minds. We're not good at it, and we make mistakes. The first

thing we read about in today's liturgy was the business of...Did you hear it in the prayer of the day? "*Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's body may show forth in their lives what they profess ...*" This is the Pascal mystery. The Easter we are celebrating is a celebration of a new covenant of reconciliation. You don't have to reconcile unless you've got a problem.

So let's ask the question: What in the world are we going to do with this infant here today? Get him wet. Well, I've already been advised that he's a big baby and we're not taking all his clothing off. *[laughter]* And I know he's going to get a little water and not a lot. I get it. All of those things are tangential to what we're really doing and what I think the Church really does in baptism. There are even those who see baptism as enlisting people into the membership of the Church but they can't vote and sit on the Vestry until they're confirmed. The part of the baptism rite will symbolically and culticly and religiously be a confirmation with the anointing with chrism. So confirmation and baptism over the centuries have been conflated into this rite. But the question still stands: what are we doing? Well, let's decide what we're *not* doing. We're not doing anything magic. We're not changing God's mind about this child. That child, had he - forbid it, Lord - died yesterday, would have been just as much a child of God as he will be after this Mass along with every other human being in the world.

Mainline churches are failing all over anyway so do you think that pudgy little boy is going to really matter much in terms of enlisting members in the Church? This is a heavier, much more important, much more profoundly significant thing that we do today. It has nothing to do with an angry God. It has something to do with quite the opposite. It has nothing to do, it seems to me, with the ability to decide or make decisions as an adult. What we're doing today is celebrating the decision that God makes about *us*. And what is that decision? The decision we affirm in baptism is that God creates us in God's own image whatever that may mean, and God loves God's self and that part that God creates of himself which is made in his image which is you and me, friends. So in the sacrament of baptism, to me and to my way of understanding, we use water which is a symbol of a lot of things. It's a symbol of power. You remember the flood. It's a symbol of destruction. It's a symbol of death. It's a symbol of life. Nothing lives without water. One of the gruesome things that you may or may not know - you know people talk about, "*I don't want to be burned up in cremation.*" Well, when a body is cremated it primarily evaporates. It doesn't burn; it dries up.

At the Easter Vigil we read about the dry bones coming together. The bones were dead because they were dry. Water is a symbol of life. Water is a symbol of refreshment. Water is a symbol of cleansing. Water is a powerful, powerful symbol. And, friends, it's been said in my hearing that the next most significant wars on this earth will be fought about air and water. Do you remember in your childhood thinking that it was nuts to buy water?

The best example I have is years and years ago English friends of mine who were expatriates to Mexico were visiting in my home in New Jersey. We were at the dining room table and I was fussed about a spot on the carpet in the dining room - jam or something. I tried all kinds of chemical sprays and dry cleaning things. I don't care about those spots now, frankly. *[laughter]* But Elizabeth, an extraordinarily beautiful and artistic woman, saw me on my hands and knees drying to deal with this spot, and she said to me, "*Ronald, have you tried soap and water?*" *[laughter]* I did. It worked! *[laughter]*

The power of the water that we will use today, water that when we read the prayer to bless and dedicate the font which, by the way, is a family bowl. The container's not important but in the Medieval Church fonts were often made of stone. There are those who studied fonts in churches in places such as England and the font often looks like a tomb where we are buried with Christ in a death like his so that we might be raised with Christ in a resurrection like his, or sometimes they're shaped like a womb. I sort of like that image because this is the womb where Mother Church breaks water to give birth to her sons and daughters. At the Easter Vigil in

some churches the first Mass of Easter when the Pascal candle is lighted for the first time outside and brought into a dark church to light the whole church, the first hot wax of that candle is spilt onto the virgin waters of the font. Now it doesn't take much guessing to know what that's all about, does it? The impregnation of Mother Church by the erect resurrected Savior so that in this place Mother Church might bear forth her sons and daughters into the world. Another great image of water as a life-giving element. It is here in the prayer before the baptism. We'll blow on the water to make it look lively. The technical term for that is insufflation. Have you every had a fallen souffle? You know what I mean. The point of this sacrament is for those of us who call ourselves the Church to express to that tiny little pudgy baby back there the love of God and to say the love of God is like a rushing flood of water, the same kind of flood of water you came sliding into this world from your mother's womb, the same kind of water you take a bath in, the same kind of water you drink, the same kind of water that gives life to the earth - is our understanding of what God's love for you is like, and it's complete and it's clean and it's powerful and it's lovely and it's yours. And it comes without question. It has nothing to do with a nasty angry God. It has to do with a loving, cleansing, holy, powerful, life-giving, beautiful Creator who says, "*I love you like a flood.*" That's baptism, an expression of the love of God by people who claim to be members of the Church which is known as the Body of Christ.

Now we started thinking about this, or at least I did, by expressing how gypped I feel by not being able to touch the body of Christ. Well, guess what? This is the best we can do now to see Christ here. It's believing that those of us who are baptized are in part members of that body. It might have holes in the hands, it might have a bloody side, it might appear in a spooky room somewhere, but it's more commonly known as we know each other face to face in human bodies. We make a huge rumpus about Christmas. Well, friends, we wouldn't know a blessed thing about Christmas if we didn't have Easter. Christmas would simply be another birth of a little baby in the Middle East 2,000 years ago, and how many of those do you know about and remember? One. Well, why do you remember that one? Because that little baby came to be believed to have a message about the love of God which was so astounding that people felt they had to kill the messenger. It was so upsetting to politics, to government, to Church, to economic systems that people just couldn't believe that there was nobody outside of or beyond the love of God. People couldn't believe that God's love was like a flood. People couldn't believe that God's love nourished all people who were thirsty. People couldn't believe that God's love washed everyone who was dirty. And so we are left with this reality that if a Risen Lord is going to be seen in the world today, that Lord is going to be seen by others in us when we behave like that Lord.

I used the example last week from the book *Humans of New York* which was loaned to me by Donna Reaser. I shared this before but I think it's so important to repeat. In that book which is a collection of photographs is a photograph of an old Jewish woman, a beautiful old woman with a gorgeous mink hat and mink fur coat on. When the photograph was taker her husband was dying and the caption simply says, "*I asked Moe what I would do after he died. Moe's response was, 'Take the love you have for me and share it with others.'*"

Now as far as I'm concerned, that's enough Christian theology to last me the rest of my life. That's all that happens here. It is taking the love that Jesus brought into the world and sharing it with others in a touchable way, in a tangible fashion, in a way that cleanses and refreshes and reminds us of birth and death and God's love and presence with us through the entire journey of life. So this can be a tomb. Our fear of death is gone as long as we are with the Lord. It can be a womb. You know there was a time not long ago when the Church wouldn't ordain women. A friend of mine who's sitting in front of you at the moment was opposed to the ordination of women until he encountered one at Trinity Church Broadway and Wall Street, and then that very friend of mine I heard in his own parish church outside Bristol in England say, "*I have changed my mind.*" Why? Because he had an encounter with another human being, not an idea. He encountered God's ability to do that. The point of all of that was my argument that when we take a child we never spread its legs and say,

“Oops, missing. No baptism.”

This is God’s certification and affection for all of us for all time, no differences withstanding. This is God’s inimitable expression of total, complete and pure love for all of creation. And what we do today is we say that love belongs to Cody entirely, personally, fully, without question, no matter what comes down the pike. As long as he is in touch with us it is our job to make sure that before he knows squat he knows this: that he is loved. That’s all! And if it’s love that you give him, it’s divine love because there aren’t any other kinds. And that’s what this is. We’re not sparing babies from going to hell. We are celebrating the fact that as human beings we cannot live without love and we’re celebrating the fact that as Christians we acknowledge, believe, teach and confess that love is divine and we are pleased to share that love, just as that old Jewish lady was told to by her very, very wise and loving husband whose name was Moe but might as well have been Jesus. *“Share the love you have for me with others.”* And there were no qualifiers on that. None at all.

So all we’re doing is celebrating God’s love for Cody and reminding ourselves as a part of this service of God’s love for us and confessing that Jesus does become tangible as we believe that truth and take it seriously and that our job is to continue to make Jesus visible, tangible and accessible as long as we live. Simple!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.