

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The Sixth Sunday of Easter
1 May 2016

Scripture readings:

Acts 16:9-15 Psalm 67 Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 John 14:23-29

Today we're starting to think about the Holy Spirit because we're coming to the end of that great fifty-day cycle of Easter when we celebrate resurrection from the dead. We're looking toward Ascension Sunday when all of the "peekaboo" experiences with Jesus come to an end. We refer to them as the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus:

- In the upper room, "*Put your hand in my side and your finger in my nail holes*"
- On the road to Emmaus and breaking of bread they realize it was Jesus with them
- On the beach frying fish, preparing breakfast for them

Now that's going to come to an end, and the early Church has an extraordinary question, and it's a darn good question: "*What are we going to do when Jesus is gone? What's going to happen to us when he dies? Does that mean that we die too?*" It was a good question 2,000 years ago. It's a good question today. If God leaves us alone - and of course these are texts from the early Church which is arriving at or perhaps even *has* arrived at an idea that Jesus is in fact God and a part of the godhead - What happens when that visible part of the godhead that we have known as Jesus, the carpenter's son, Mary's son, has in fact died and been buried - and, O.K., resurrected - but now disappeared entirely. What happens to us when we can no longer see God?

Well, this text is an indication of the belief in the early Church that that wasn't the only way God was manifest in the person of Jesus. There certainly was an idea long before Jesus was there that God could be understood as the Creator of everything that was - including us - but now we're starting to get ideas about the Holy Spirit which isn't a foreign idea to us because we grow up with these concepts of the Holy Trinity as very much a part of our way of thinking about God, and we're taught early on that - No, God isn't three gods. There's only one God but this God is known in three different ways.

But the idea of the Holy Spirit has been a problem in the Church for a very long time, and it was one of the major difficulties that separated the Eastern Church from the Western Church, the Orthodox Church from the kind of Church we are in at the moment. Two words. In the creed, talking about the Holy Spirit, we say we believe in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son. In Latin that's one word. It's really two words conflated into one - *filioque*. *Que* means *and*. *Filio* is *son*. The Orthodox Church cannot bring itself to say that in their concept of the Holy Trinity that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, but proceeds from the Father, period.

Now I'm kind of hopeful that at this point of the 21st century, and at least among us, that problem may be as small as it ought to be. But people kill themselves over ideas like this, you know. Divided families created politics.

There's a rather large icon that hangs in my home. It's considered a rather corrupt icon because it attempts to depict God the Father which in traditional Orthodox iconography is never done. God the Father is never depicted because you can't see God the Father. And you know the whole iconoclastic controversy was over whether or not you could make pictures at all because it violates the commandment - graven images. But the argument after a couple of centuries of fighting about this won the day that you *could* create images of Jesus because Jesus was *seen*. You couldn't be creative about how you depicted Jesus because...They didn't have photocopy machines, [*laughter*] so what did they do? There are two traditions. When Jesus wiped his face when

he was carrying his cross, the image of his face was left on Veronica's veil. It wasn't a painted image, but an impression. Are you getting an idea of why to some people the Shroud of Turin might be important?

Another tradition was that Jesus was asked by an ancient Middle Eastern king to heal his leprosy, and Jesus was too busy so he took out his handkerchief and wiped his face and sent the image back to the king of Odessa and that healed his leprosy. So the whole thing in iconography is that these images that we receive in icons today are all copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies so, therefore, we know what Jesus looked like and therefore we can reproduce those. There's also a tradition that Saint Luke was the first one to paint an image or the portrait of Saint Mary. There are many traditions.

I'm reading a book at the moment which is talking about how the early scriptures were copied and copied and copied - some by good scribes, some by bad scribes, some by scribes that added things, some by scribes that changed things. Be careful when you're tempted to say, "*The Bible says...*" Be very careful.

But the point of this text is it indicates that the job of the Holy Spirit "*whom the Father will send in my name*" will do two things for you: "*The Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said.*" So as people who, by virtue of our membership in the Church, are recipients of the Holy Spirit wherever the Holy Spirit may come from - from God or from the Father and the Son, or just from the Father - the work of the Holy Spirit is to teach us and to remind us that somehow the Church was afraid of what would happen when Jesus ultimately disappeared. And as people who are taught and reminded of the Church's early experience with Jesus and its importance, it seems to me, we are being told by Jesus himself in this text that we will be used to make Jesus reappear, to resurrect - that the post-resurrection experiences aren't just a game of peekaboo, now you see him, now you don't. There are child psychologists who believe that the early games of peekaboo are in fact early experiments with death - that Jesus can and, in fact, does and also desires to remain visible in this world because of people such as yourselves who make mission statements such as yours which say things like, "*St. John's mission is to welcome all people - not just us, but all people - to embody the love of Christ.*"

Now the whole business about the resurrection of the body has to do with the resurrection of the visible, that which can be seen, touched, experienced and engaged with in a relationship. And Jesus says, "*I will send to you who have had this extraordinary personal relationship with me, I will send with you God's presence to live with you so that you can do what I have done which has been bring God to others bodily, physically, personally, tangible, really.*"

You've often heard the arguments about what happens with the elements of bread and wine at the celebration of the sacrament, and you eventually run into the words "*really present.*" Believe what you will about real presence in bread and wine, the instruction for us is that if that means anything - that sacrament on that table - it means that we who approach this meal do so with the understanding that we are being filled by God's will and God's Spirit to embody, to make visible, tangible, present and loving the presence of God in the world today and now and not just in a nice ... the Germans have a wonderful word for this - in a nice *gemuetlich* situation. Do you know what *gemuetlich* is? It's when you sit down and have a cup of coffee and a nice gossip. The doors are closed against the rest of the world, the lace curtains are of course freshly cleaned and pressed, and you're safe and in the family circle and fed and warm. Jesus isn't about that as much as about giving flesh and blood and presence and reality, tangibility to God's love which belongs, strangely enough, to all people - *all* people.

That may sound like a peculiarly Christian idea but did you hear the words of the Psalm today? The Psalm is extraordinary in that it exclaims that God should be blessed by us and by everybody else, that God's ways should be known upon the earth and that all the people... Did you get a sense of how often the word

“people” is used in the Psalm today? *“Your saving health among all the nations”* - that’s people. *“Let the peoples praise you, let all the peoples praise you...Let the nations be glad and sing...Let the peoples praise you.”* You know what that word is? That’s gentiles. That’s foreigners, outsiders, speakers of different languages, people from the other side of the border. Everybody else who’s not a part of the religious community are the gentiles. *“Let everybody praise and love you, O God, the same way we do.”*

Oh, I might burn in hell for this, and some of you are going to see the bishop today so they can report. Maybe some even do a better job of it than we do. Let God be worshiped for God’s goodness, and let us be receptacles of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus present in our lives so that others can see the Jesus we have seen. And that Holy Spirit we are assured by Jesus in the gospel today will teach us how to do that. Part of that teaching happened this weekend as we sat down as a parish to dinner, spent comfortable morning hours on a Saturday when we all should have been in bed talking about how we will make God visible in what we do together here. That God will teach us what to do and remind us of what was said to us by Jesus so that we might be in fact what it was we got excited about at Christmas - Emmanuel which means “God with us.” So as we celebrate God with us we become a part of making God with, present, visible, tangible, at work in the rest of the world in what we do together by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. If we’re really busy doing that, are we going to care if we say the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father or from the Father and the Son?

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