

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

Scripture readings:

Acts 16:16-34

Psalm 97

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 John 17:20-26

I don't know what the problem is with somebody following Paul and the others saying, "*These men are slaves of the Most High God, who proclaim to you a way of salvation.*" Is there any problem with that? So why did he get so upset? Well, my guess is he was upset because she was a slave and people were making money on her or with her or by her, that she was being used as a source of gainful employment for somebody who enslaved her. Of course nobody would know about slavery better than she would, would they? And when she sees how Paul and the others love and serve God, she sees that as slavery, and it *is* a sort of slavery, but it's a willing kind of slavery and servitude.

Were you in church on Thursday? Neither was I. A lot of people don't go mid-week, but maybe we should have because this past Thursday was an important day in the life of the Church and the Church calendar: Ascension Day. All the Catholic kids got off from school for that. Do you remember those days?

The pope this morning suggested that the Church was celebrating Ascension today so even he probably gets it that a lot of people missed it on Thursday. So let's remember today as Ascension Sunday. If we had had a mass here on Thursday, at the reading of the gospel we would have extinguished the large Paschal Candle. The Church has come up with two traditions about that so next week at Pentecost we'll extinguish the Easter candle at the reading of the gospel. I sort of prefer the Thursday business because between Thursday and next Sunday Jesus is dead, risen, disappeared and the Church doesn't know where to go. Lost. Abandoned. I mean we've just spent the whole Easter season dealing with those extraordinary post-resurrection appearances of Jesus - cooking breakfast fish on the beach, in a locked upper room where Thomas has to poke him in the wounds and put his hand in his side. This whole gospel business about I in them and them in me. Nobody gets into Jesus more than Thomas does - puts his hand right in there. And breaking bread on the road to Emmaus where all of a sudden they have this V-8 moment: "*Oh my goodness, that must be Jesus with us!*"

I think every time we celebrate the sacrament right here in this room at the table is a celebration of that business of realizing Jesus present with us when we break bread, and, as you know, one of the great important actions in the liturgy of this congregation is the breaking of the bread. "*Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore, let us keep the feast.*" In that action of breaking bread somehow we recall the disciples on the road to Emmaus and Jesus being recognized in their presence. And woe to those who don't wait a few seconds before they break the bread. That's an "in" joke. There's a rubric in the liturgy which says there's a pause before the breaking of the bread. I'm sure that's done to emphasize and dramatize that moment of recognition. But when the Paschal Candle is out and Jesus has not only ascended from the dead but stopped being seen, that's the deal on Ascension Thursday.

The artistic expressions of Ascension are really quite wonderful and I think sometimes even very humorous because you get this idea of clouds and the bottom of two feet - just this sort of forced perspective of Jesus' footprints going into heaven - which reminds me of a cartoon that appeared a long time ago in *Playboy* magazine. Do I have your attention? [laughter] Mary Poppins. "*Oh look, you can see up her dress!*" Oh Pastor, how can you say that in a sermon? Well, because we can look up Jesus' dress, and there we find the equipment of full humanity: the penis that was circumcised on

the eighth day when the Savior as an infant bled for the first time for the salvation of humanity, God becoming a real human being in every respect as you and I are human. You can be as embarrassed about that as you want, but that's the message of the gospel: that you have a God who inhabits your kind of body, who lived and died as one of us.

Now those are important planks in Christian theology because throughout the 2,000 years of the Church there have been other ideas about Jesus - that he only really looked like a man. He was a sort of bionic savior. Because he was God he couldn't suffer because God can't do anything that's imperfect. Because he was God he didn't really feel pain. He just went through the motions of pretending to be God. Or that he wasn't really God, that he was just a really nice guy that God looked at and said, "*Oh, he's so good, I'm going to adopt him as my son.*" But the Church in the first couple hundreds of years comes up with these ideas that Jesus is both fully human and fully divine - just like that little baby there - fully dependent on two human beings, Joseph and Mary, to provide him brothers and sisters. I'm sorry. The biblical account does indicate that there were other children. What does that do to your need for a virgin mother?

By the way, I have trouble with that virginity for this reason: If you're going to give me a fully human God, you'd better give me a fully human mother. And I do not know how babies get here other than through copulation, gestation and partition. O.K.

So we have this separation after Jesus ascends, and the last thing we see are the soles of his feet, the separation of a risen and now ascended body - not a spirit. I can't see that, and I don't care what Ghostbusters says, and I don't care what all those green television programs are about that set sensors and cameras to see ghosts and all. I can't, never have, and never expect to see a spirit. I am a human being who sees other human beings. I am in and of a body. I see bodies. And what the Church celebrated on Thursday was the ascension of a body into heaven with the promise that "*as you have seen me in the body, I go in my body to where God is so that you in your body may go to God.*"

And not only that, friends, the business of going to God long before we get there. How about the business of embodying God while we're here. And what is, in fact, the mission statement of this congregation? *To invite all people to embody the love of Christ.* Our reason for being here is to take whatever kind of spiritual ideas we have and put bodies on them so that together we might form, not individually, but together we might form the Body of Christ continuing to live in the world today in a way that is visible, in a way that is effective, in a way that makes a difference in the world, in a way that - yes, friends - *saves* the world.

So this interesting gospel - "*I in them and them in me and ...*" I think is just the business of trying to theologize what it means for us to embody the love of Christ and to communicate that love to each other and to the world. And the interesting thing is I don't think our mission statement differs in one iota from the entire message of the gospel because it says to welcome *all* people. That's not just my kind. It's not just the wealthy. It's not just North Americans. It's not just white Christians. It is all people are seen by us to be potential members of the embodied love of God without which the world is up a creek without a paddle. Our business is to believe that Jesus ascended to get the heck out of the way so that you and I could take that place and not by our own volition, not by our own strength, not by our own doing, but by the gift that God gives us of the Holy Spirit. And we'll get around to celebrating that fully and completely next Sunday when we will celebrate Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit, when we'll finally get around to extinguishing the Easter candle, when we will think about what it means to have God present, not just in the person of Jesus Christ, but God present in the Body of Christ which is the Church everywhere in the world - including you and me, without exception. And this is the whole idea in the fancy, highfalutin Church term of *the incarnation*, the business of God with meat on God. It's the old illustration I've used fifty times. You can all repeat it with me. The difference between chili and chili con carne is *chili* is beans and *chili con carne* is beans with meat. The incarnation is God with meat - your meat, my meat, our meat. It's real, friends. This is

a living, embodied, fleshly God we're talking about, who knows us inside and out, who loves all that we have and are because God created it and gave it to us. And isn't that the result of that love? Say it, Claire. Spell your name. Claire, by the way, means light. So there is where light comes into darkness as human beings give to the world other human beings and we come to believe that we give to God a body that God gives to us in the first place.

Christmas was a celebration of the incarnation in terms of the person of Jesus the Christ. Ascension and Pentecost are a celebration of the incarnation in terms of God being born in us here and now - as we sang in the Christmas carol - today. "*Be born in us today.*" That we become the Body of Christ by virtue of God's gift to the world and the Church of the Holy Spirit. And just as we can believe, teach and confess that Jesus embodied God in the midst of his friends and disciples 2,000 years ago, we believe, teach and confess that we can embody the love of God here and now in this world today and in our time and neighborhoods and all of our relationships with each other in the world. Merry Christmas! Happy Easter!

So now even the pope this morning at the end of his address acknowledged that much of the world is celebrating *El Dia de Mamme*, believe it or not. You may or may not know that I think that's a celebration about which we as the Church need to be extraordinarily careful because we forget its history in our culture and country and because it becomes an exclusive celebration of I'm not quite sure what, and therefore it requires testing with the litmus of the gospel.

Ann Jarvis at the end of the Civil War organized mothers to care for wounded soldiers from the battlefields. She made it very clear that they were going to care for the injured from whichever side of the battle line they came from. So it was a first aid effort. It was an effort related to sanitary realities, trying to heal people who were wounded and dying from the North or the South. She enjoined mothers all over the place to help with that effort. Her daughter, Anna, who according to some reports really didn't like her mother very much, cajoled presidents and eventually Woodrow Wilson agreed to promulgate this Sunday in May as Mother's Day. Singular possessive: "mother- apostrophe-s-day" as a day to encourage people to celebrate their own mothers as opposed to "mother-s-apostrophe," a day for all mothers. I'm grateful for that differentiation but I think we need to be careful about all of it. Why? When talking about the Body of Christ and not thinking about secular celebrations such as Mother's Day which leak into the Church by osmosis, we run the risk of abandoning a vigorous understanding of the good news of Jesus Christ for all people.

A cursory celebration of Mother's Day could be a celebration of the simple biological function of birth-giving. Well, there are women who wanted to give birth who couldn't. In my first parish was a woman named Louise Luppold who desperately wanted children, and she confided to me that she asked her sister who had two boys whether or not she might adopt one of her nephews as her own. It didn't fly.

And there are ideas even in our own culture that women who are pregnant against their will ought to become mothers, like it or not. There are women who - well, I'll give you my best example - a woman who never had children who mothered me greatly and who continues to this day at the age of 101. There is the failure to acknowledge that there are women who have children they don't want. There is the failure to acknowledge those who provide mothering who are in no way related to the biological realities of birth-giving, and that includes men who are more useful than carrying tables. Forgive me for this, but twice this morning people were asked to move tables on the basis of their gender. Do you want to know something biological? Women are the stronger of the species. *[laughter]* Yes, yes, yes!

The business of treating women differently means that until not long ago in the last century women couldn't vote. How many years ago was it in both the Lutheran and Episcopal churches that women could not be ordained? Women still do not, even in our own enlightened country in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, do not have pay parity on the basis of gender.

And I think we also know that men are able to do some kinds of nurturing also. And to excuse them on a day like today which invites grotesque hypocrisies based in large part on guilt because everybody else is doing it - to take the old girl out for lunch, pin an orchid on her, and make sure she's home by dinnertime tomorrow to cook and do the dishes. If it's good enough today to celebrate your mother and I hope it is, don't forget there are 364 other days left to do it without the hypocrisy of social and cultural pressures. It's fascinating to know that Anna Jarvis, who is primarily responsible for Mother's Day, was incensed and infuriated early on with the card companies, the florists, and the chocolate companies for missing the point. She must have been a real oddball. She vigorously worked to make her position known.

The Church celebrates all people as complete and fully equipped human beings, and so I think St. Paul was upset at the use of a woman with vision to make money - not because of what she said, but because of how she was used. The gospel is a gospel of love for all people. How long ago was it and does it still happen - of course it does! - that we argued that black people were not humans - Forget gender. Let's just limit it to color - and, therefore, were not equal. And, therefore, couldn't vote. Therefore, could be used without being paid. And, therefore, could be tortured.... What does that have to do with the gospel? Nothing, but was that position argued in terms of the gospel in scripture? You'd better believe it!

So even though Mother's Day may be a nice thing - that's always a red flag for me. When things get nice, we're in trouble. There is even one person who is not here today because she was asked to pick up the pink and white carnations for another congregation today. You know you get a pink one if you mom's still alive, and if she's dead you get a white one. Yuk!

So I would like to resurrect Mother's Day for all of us, and I would like to suggest that as Christians all of us - table-lifters and non table-lifters - engage in the serious commitment to nurture and love each other as mothers and fathers at their best do, whether or not we have children, whether or not we have children and we've lost them, whether or not we've had children we wanted or didn't want. The gospel is there for us to believe that God is love, and our job is to embody that love for all people - gender, color, age, circumstance, preference, denomination - we have a Baptist here this morning. You make the Methodists look like they're Episcopalians. *[laughter]* And the Lutherans over there. I don't know where to put them. *[laughter]* But the business of being a Christian, the business of being a part of the Body of Christ is the business of loving without category, exception, or excuse.

Now you know that occasionally I refer to God in the feminine, and that upsets some people because they're just not used to it. But some people's image of a man - a pants-wearer, a table-lifter, a testosterone-ridden, angry, old, bearded personage in the sky is not sufficient to express the love of God. And what you may or may not know is the oldest and grandest church in all of Christendom is in Istanbul, Turkey - Hagia Sophia. Hagia Sophia means Holy Wisdom, and wisdom in scripture is always an understood personality of the Almighty and is always feminine. And by our continued lack of attention to things such as Mother Day, we forget that piece because we tend to compartmentalize and divide rather than unify and include. And if the gospel for today invites us to do anything, it is to include and to extend and to commit ourselves to believing that if God is with us, God's love can be known through us, by us and everyone else in the world.

So if it were up to me, we'd be without a Paschal Candle today and we'd be sitting shivering in our boots worrying about what's going to happen to the Church now that Jesus is gone. But that would be a sort of charade anyway because we know what will happen to the Church. God's desire is to come into each and every one of you in that sack of flesh and bones you saw in the mirror when you got out of the shower this morning, as wicked as that may have been. *[laughter]* And remember that when we saw Jesus go up we saw the bottom of his feet, and when the Holy Spirit comes down it's going to come down through us as flames of fire through our heads and bodies to the bottoms of our feet so that we might be able by God's grace to receive and share that love at all times with all peoples

and recognize God present with us in surprising ways, perhaps especially in the breaking of bread as God was known to them on the road to Emmaus.

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