

I Will Dance With You
Sunday, April 15, 2012
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church, New Orleans, Louisiana

Lectionary Passages: Psalm 133, Acts 4:32-35, 1 John 1:1-2:2, John 20:19-31

I grew up in Athens, Georgia, in a church similar to this one in many ways. Many of the sights and sounds and smells are familiar to me. The choir robes were a different shade of green, but green nonetheless. During our service in Athens, we heard the noises of downtown in the background, much like the streetcar's hum and other outside noises we hear from inside this sanctuary, sounds I only consider to be natural parts of worship; they are just further accompaniment, joining in with the pipe organ and choir.

The warmness of this congregation is also familiar and appreciated—your smiles and open arms bring to my mind sentimental memories of home each Wednesday and Sunday. Thank you for so genuinely welcoming my family into this house of worship and thank you for inviting me into this pulpit. I am very, very grateful to and for each one of you.

In my first preaching class in seminary, one of the two sermons we gave to the class was filmed so that we could see and hear ourselves and receive feedback as we watched the replay with our professor. For most of my sermon, my head was cocked to the left. So, if you see me do that too much, kindly just make a gesture to let me know that my head is staying too long in its comfortable position.

My second preaching professor, Dr. Claypool, was both a wonderful Baptist and Episcopalian minister. And so, with him in mind, I offer to you, “The Lord be with you... Let us pray.”

Almighty God, we come before you, together in shared worship of you, and we ask that your Spirit join us as you speak to our hearts, through song, through Scripture, through teaching and reflection. In Your Name we pray, Amen.

I remember sitting with an elderly Jewish woman as she lay dying in the hospice inpatient unit. Her family was coming, but they had not yet arrived. The funeral home's instructions were for me to, upon her death, open the window in her room, light a candle, and place it on the windowsill. The symbolism was described to me as this: the open window represented an easier passage for the soul to find its resting place. The candle's flame represented life's beauty and its fragility. At life's end, the soul, like the flame, faded away.

On this, the second Sunday of Easter, we live knowing that the light of Jesus has returned to earth. The passage we just read from the Gospel of John sets the scene for us: After making his initial appearances to Mary and the other women, Jesus walks into a locked room where the disciples are huddled together, fearing the unrest that is still around. Jesus offers to them: “Peace be with you.” He shows them his hands and his side. The disciples rejoice, and rightly so, the promise has been fulfilled! Jesus again offers, “Peace be with you” and then breathes onto them, baptizing them with this new beginning. “Receive the Holy Spirit,” he says, “if you forgive the sins of any, then they are forgiven.”

Then Thomas enters the story.

I’ve always felt that Thomas gets a bad rap. We call him “Doubting Thomas,” as if we were schoolchildren on the playground—“Ooh...look at Thomas...see what he did?...he’s in trouble!” Poke, poke, nudge, nudge, giggle, giggle. Poor Thomas. Even the scripture has a nickname for him, “Didymus” or translated from the Greek, “the Twin.”

Thomas says, “I wasn’t there when you saw him. I didn’t see. I didn’t touch. I need to see, I need to touch.

A few days later, Thomas, now with the disciples in the same room as before, gets the chance. Jesus beckons to him, “Here, Thomas, see and touch my hands, see and touch my side.”

I want to pause and leave you with that image and look at two of the other Scripture passages we heard today.

From Psalm 133: “How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!”

From Acts 4:32-35: “Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles’ feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.”

What do we hear and what pictures do we see in these verses? In Psalms, we hear that kindred—family—are living together in unity, and it is good.

And in Acts, “the ones who believed were of one heart and soul.” It’s a little unclear to me who “the ones who believed” are; the scribes don’t seem to like identifying their pronouns. Earlier in chapter 4, in verse 4, we find that Peter and John have a number of believers around them—about 5000. This number is significant to me—a large group of people are getting along—they are holding everything in common; no one is needy. Actually, any number, be it 5 or 5000 is impressive. My family is small and we don’t always get along.

As an aside, I don’t think this means that everyone had everything they wanted. They didn’t all have I-Pads and convertibles—they had what they needed. More importantly, and I’m presuming a little here, they were all able to voice what they needed so that they could receive it.

We also see in this passage from Acts that the apostles are giving their testimony of Christ’s resurrection with “great power” and that “great grace was upon them all.” Again, it’s unclear to me what this power is—it could mean that they gave their testimony with an emphatic tone or it could be that they were *empowered* by the Holy Spirit—according to verse 31, they were filled with the Holy Spirit. Regardless, there is something behind this testimony, something in it, an energy, a bubbling, like lava out of a volcano, like the excitement of a child whose mother has just come to pick her up—it is an emulsion of emotion, trembling and joy and enthusiasm—Jesus has returned from the dead! Jesus has atoned for our sins! For my sins! For your sins!

I believe that this group of people, apostles and new believers included, who are able to live as a unified body, are significant because they all are able to live that way together. But perhaps more significant is that this picture of unity **is** the testimony of Christ’s resurrection, or a testament **to** Christ’s resurrection. They share their material goods **and** they share the message of Jesus. Do we believe that such a picture would illustrate the testimony of Christ’s resurrection today? Wouldn’t we work more fervently to realize harmony amongst believers if we did have that belief?

Let’s look back at the verses we read earlier in the service from 1st John. “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands—the word of life is revealed and we have seen it and testify to it. We tell you so that you may be in fellowship with us—our fellowship will be together, with God and with Jesus. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

What do we hear and see in these verses? We have again this notion of sharing. This community desires to share the word of life. But these verses take us a step further. The inference is that the joy of the message of the Risen Christ is not complete **unless** it is shared.

This community of believers, presumably the Johannine community, is several decades removed from the resurrection. They are not in the locked room with the disciples and Jesus; they have not seen his hands or his side. Yet, they know, and are declaring that the path of light is underneath the footsteps of Jesus. Fellowship is on that path, grace is on that path.

The excitement is still there, isn't it? Can you hear it in their words? They "declare" it or "proclaim" it, 4 times in 5 verses.

There is a story of an anthropologist in Africa who was amongst the children of one tribe. He told the children that there was a basket of fruit underneath a tree and that the first child who reached the tree got the whole basket for himself. The children formed a line, held each other's hands, and ran together to the tree, claiming the basket for the entire group.

The man asked them, "Why didn't one of you want to reach the tree first and have the fruit all to yourself?" The children replied, "**Ubuntu!**," which means, "**I am because we are.**" "How can one of us be happy if the rest are sad?" The story gives a picture at the end of the children sitting in a circle together, their feet touching, smiling, laughing, and enjoying the fruit together.

To me, this story perfectly illustrates and connects the three passages from Psalms, Acts, and 1st John. Children just naturally communicate the heart of excitement to me. They can't help it. I'm glad that they don't have an emotion on the plane between extreme excitement and extreme disappointment. I can see the children in this illustration running together, or maybe skipping together as one unit, bubbling over in anticipation of the sweet, juicy fruit that is to be shared between them.

Our basket of fruit, the message of Jesus and the grace that God has granted to us through Jesus, is waiting to be seen, to be held, to be touched, and to be tasted. If we were to keep it to ourselves, the joy that we would derive would not be complete. It is in the sharing that we find the complete picture of joy and of nourishment.

Now, back to the passage with Thomas. Jesus paints a lovely picture of sharing for his disciples. He offers peace in the midst of a troubled time—“Peace be with you.” He shows himself—the wounds on his hands and his side. He offers peace again—“Peace be with you.” He then breathes out—giving the disciples the message and power of the Holy Spirit for them to carry and proclaim to others.

He does no different for Thomas. We are often led to believe that Thomas is a misfit and somehow asking more of Jesus than anyone else. But Jesus does the same things for Thomas, giving him what he specifically needs—Jesus offers him peace and then shows him his hands and his side.

I sympathize with Thomas because I understand him. I’m pretty sure that I would have asked the same things of Jesus. After all, Jesus was there, then was on the cross, then was in the tomb. That was what my eyes would have seen. I would need to reach out and touch in order to believe something different. I think that’s human nature. Have you been out and about with a 1 ½ year-old lately? Annie has to touch everything, and I mean everything! Her hands will not stay beside her, or in a shopping cart, or in her high chair at the dinner table. Life is a little messy for us right now.

Jesus understands the messiness of life. He understands that God’s grace is illogical to us. Why would a Holy Savior be sacrificed for us? For **me**? I hear this disbelief in Thomas’ words.

Furthermore, if I truly believed that Christ died for my sins and rose again, in a truly miraculous fashion, would I not constantly be testifying with joy about this joy?

But no, I do not. I need constant reminders from Jesus of his wounds. Yes, I get Thomas—he **is** a twin—he’s **my** twin.

One choral concert I attended in college included a piece from Jacob Handl. In Latin, the title is “Regnum Mundi Et Omnem Ornatum.” Translated, and with more of the text added, it means, “I have held in contempt worldly power and all temporary joys because of the love of Jesus Christ, my Lord, whom I have seen, whom I have loved, in whom I have believed and found solace.”

I copied the text onto a card and have kept it in my wallet ever since as a reminder. While working with these scriptures this week, I remembered the card and pulled it out. I like to read it and re-remember—I **have** seen Jesus because I have seen his work in me and in others around me. I love him and believe in him because he loves me and believes in me. He has offered me peace at many points in my life and I am greatly revived each time with

solace. I believe that Jesus has shown me his hands and his side before and I believe that time and time again, he will show them to me, lovingly granting me unending grace.

May I be brave like Thomas and ask for what I need. May I acknowledge and validate others around me who have doubts, making sure that I am not a hindrance as they seek to see Jesus' wounds.

One of my favorite patients is a lady who is very sweet but very frail and very weak. I sit with her sometimes and we talk about whatever she can talk about. She doesn't really know what year it is, doesn't know who of her family is alive, and isn't really sure of who I am though she smiles at me a lot, a gift for which I am grateful.

During one of our visits, she asked me to come over and help her stand up from the couch. I obliged and went over to her, held out my hands and let her grab them. Slowly, gently, she stood and then with one hand grabbed my side. With a telling grin she asked, "Do you want to dance?" "Sure," I replied, "I will dance with you." I placed my free hand on her side.

"Do you know any songs," she asked?" Racking my brain, pleasantly caught off-guard from the request, I came up with a song that I thought would be familiar to her and one that was fresh on my mind—I sing it to Annie often. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. . . ." We swayed, back and forth, and she chimed in with a word every now and then.

The moments of dancing and singing were peace-filled, weaknesses were bared and needs were shared. It is in encounters like this one that I feel most connected to Jesus and to his grace and to his promise of resurrection.

How shall we share the gracious message of Jesus?

While our candle is still lit, flickering, but beautiful, may we share our joy as children share their joy, as Thomas and the other disciples shared their joy.

Like Jesus, may we offer peace in troubled times. May we share and show our wounds. May we offer peace, even again.

May we breathe and speak and sing with the power of the Holy Spirit, having been blessed again and again with God's grace, willing to share the basket of fruits, willing to dance, eager to experience joy that is completed.

Amen.