Sermon for 4/23

**Acts 2:14a, 22-32**

**Psalm 16**

**1 Peter 1:3-9**

**John 20:19-31**

There's a parlor game I've enjoyed playing with people over the years, and I'm sure it's one everyone here has played as well. Fortunately you don't need a parlor to play it in because there aren't many house any more that have parlors, and if they do, there's probably a big-screen TV in it.

Anyway it's the game where people think about and then compare their separate answers to this question: If you could pick anyone in the world from any time in history, who would you like to have dinner with; or perhaps, who would you like to spend an hour with.

We've all played that game, haven't we? Maybe in an idle moment, we've even just thought about it to ourselves, without sharing our answer with anyone else. It's a fun and educational activity just thinking about it, even if we never come up with our final answer.

What makes it fun, and especially what makes it educational, are two things. The first is what it tells us about the other people with whom we're playing the game. Learning the identity of the person they would most like to spend an hour with tells us a lot about what they value, what they enjoy, even perhaps what they aspire to. Or at least it tells us about the image of themselves they're seeking to project to the world of their values and what they enjoy. (When someone says Gandhi or Mother Therese' you might want to ask for their second-choice as well.)

And the second thing that makes this game educational is, of course, what it requires us to investigate about ourselves. We have to think about what we ourselves really value and enjoy, and how we rank order those things. If I'm being honest with myself, would I rather hear about someone's training and struggle to be a great boxer, for example; or would I instead like to be entertained by someone's sparkling wit, or educated by someone's great knowledge. Since we'd only have one hour, we're forced to take a close look at who we really are.

The reason I remind us of this game is because it very clearly illustrates the distinction between two different relationships we can have with another person, even though we may use the same word - the word 'to know'- in both cases, and thus fail to distinguish between them.

What I mean is that, although the results of the process we go through during our parlor game will be wildly different, the process itself will always be the same. In deciding who we would really like to get to *know*, we go through the various *beliefs* we have *about* the person. From what I believe *about* Gandhi - that he was a short bald undernourished guy from India who spoke good English and who spearheaded a pacifist movement that led to the liberation from Britain of the second-most populous country in the world - from those and other *beliefs* I have *about* Gandhi, I determine he is someone I'd like to get to *know*.

The greatest Lincoln scholar in the world, can never know Lincoln, in the way any of his clients did when he was a lawyer, the way the maid who cleaned the dishes off the table for him in the White House did, the way his friends and family and even his dog did. The scholar has what we are forced to call a 'theoretical' acquaintance; theirs was a personal acquaintance. And that is not simply a difference of degree; it's a difference of kind, even though our language leads us to conflate them.

What I want to suggest to you this morning, is that, while the goal of our existence is to get to know Jesus, the pursuit of that goal invariably begins with having begins with having certain beliefs about Him.

Let me reread to you the final three verses of our Gospel reading for today:

*29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."
30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book.
31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.*

These are the concluding verses of chapter twenty of John, and most Bible scholars believe that chapter twenty was the last chapter, as John originally wrote his Gospel, and that chapter twenty-one was a sort of postscript added at a later date. That's also what I believe, and if so, it adds special poignancy and force to verse twenty-nine, in which John offers what would be the last words of Jesus recorded by someone who actually heard them: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Jesus and John both knew that from the time of His ascension and forward, the first acquaintance anyone would ever make, would ever be able to make, with Our Lord and Savior, would be through beliefs *about* Him. Coming into relationship with Christ is not something that's a given, not something that just happens automatically. Every single Christian has to be introduced to Christ. "Faith come through hearing..." (Romans 10: 17).

Within each believer, Christianity as an evolving and maturing life has stages. There is a lot of room for variation, but the general direction is always the same. There is the new birth, there is a newness in Christ, and there is a process of growth and maturation. It is an exact parallel to the natural life as well it should be, since the natural life is merely a reflection of the divine. And in both, this series of stages is not just the rule, it is the law. There are no exceptions.

Scripture teaches us that the rebirth is a gift of grace, given by God and delivered by the Holy Spirit.

*"Truly truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.****6****Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit[*[*a*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+3:5-8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26127a)*] gives birth to spirit.****7****You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+3:5-8&version=NIV#fen-NIV-26128b)*] must be born again.’****8****The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." (John 3: 5-8)*

That birth in the spirit leads to belief in the good news communicated to us by the Gospel writers, the truth about Jesus Christ, about His birth, His ministry, His death and His resurrection. As Paul expresses it briefly:

*If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,”and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.* (Romans 10:9)

There's nothing complicated about this; it's just simple human reality. Christ needs a foothold in the life of the potential follower, a starting point, a beachhead, if you will, from which to expand, and that foothold is belief. Belief about what? Belief about the facts about Jesus, just like the facts about Gandhi we mentioned earlier. Belief that He is the Incarnate Son of God, belief in the real death and the real resurrection, and finally and most importantly, belief in the Indwelling of the Christ's own Holy Spirit.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus was never reluctant to acknowledge that the first step towards a life of mature faith - that life that is the goal of every Christian - that the first step must be the one taken by the most feeble of all human faculties, the intellect. He was never embarrassed that it might not seem "spiritual" enough.

In Chapter 14 of John's Gospel, Jesus reminds His own disciples during His final discourse that the main point of His miracles was shape their beliefs about Him: "Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or if not [because I say it], at least believe because of the things I do." (v. 14)

It's the same point he had made earlier to people who were not His close followers, and reported by John in Chapter 10: "But if I do [the miracles], even if you do not believe me, you should at least believe my deeds, in order that you may know...that the Father is in me and I am in the Father." (v. 38)

Remember that occasion towards the beginning of His ministry, when Jesus is accused of blasphemy by the teachers of the Mosaic law, because he had claimed to forgive the sins of a paralyzed man. Jesus tells them: "Is it easier to say 'Your sins are forgiven' or to say 'Get up and walk'? I will prove to you that the son of man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the paralyzed man, "Get up, pick up your bed and go home!" (Matthew 9: 6)

The point is always the same. The miracles He performs are meant to convince people of certain facts about Jesus, that He was who He said He was.

And now here in our Gospel passage for today, we find Jesus reemphasizing the same point at the very end of His time on earth, even after the resurrection. One of His own closest disciples, Thomas, the disciple who had persuaded the others to follow their leader back to Jerusalem, even if it meant their own death, this Thomas had been so shaken by the crucifixion that he would not even believe the report of his own friends that Jesus is again alive. And in the face of that demoralized doubt, Our Lord when he reappears is still willing to condescend to Thomas' human weakness, and offer him physical proof: "Touch the blood on my hands, Thomas. Feel the wound in my side."

And it is only in the relief of that reestablishment of His most basic belief - that Jesus is indeed the son of God - that Thomas can sink to his knees, and invite Jesus back in to his human life as Lord and God.

And on this first Sunday after Easter, surely it is appropriate to reflect on this fact - perhaps the most important fact of all - that the life of faith follows the pattern of the natural life. It begins with the simple and evolves into the complex. Every human being began as a single cell; every majestic oak was once a simple acorn; the universe itself has grown from a simple point of energy.

And the model for all those physical systems, like the model for the tabernacle in the wilderness, is found in heaven. The true reality is the growing life of faith in each individual, as well as Christ's spiritual body, the Church. The seed of the Church was the death of Christ; the seed of the spiritual life of every human being is the simple belief that Jesus is the living glorified Son of God and Man. All else grows from that; nothing grows without it.

That's why Jesus says, speaking of all future generations, speaking of you and me, that's why Jesus says: "Blessed are those who haven't not seen me, and yet believe." The simple belief that Jesus is the living God is the greatest blessing anyone ever receives. It is the treasure hidden in the field for which the man sells everything he has; it is the pearl of great price which outweighs the value of everything else. It is not the end of the Christian life of faith, it is the beginning; but it is the first step that must be taken, or these is no life at all.

And so our prayer for this morning and for this message, gracious God, is that on this first Sunday after thousands of Easters, that we may, like Thomas on the first Sunday after the first Easter, that we we may share his joy in his renewed belief that Jesus, his Lord and his God, is truly alive. Grant us the humility to recognize and the courage to acknowledge how young we all are in the life of faith. Strengthen our willingness to spend time in your word and in private prayer, which are your chosen ways of deepening our relationship with Jesus, and moving that relationship from believing things about our Lord and Savior, and towards knowing Him personally in His glorious reality, for it is in His name we pray.