Worship Resources for April 7th—Second Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 5:27-32, Psalm 118:14-29 or Psalm 150; John 20:19-31; Revelation 1:4-8

During the Easter season, the lectionary uses passages from Acts to celebrate the Resurrection and the proclamation of Jesus as the Risen Lord. Acts 5:27-32 contains Peter and the other apostles’ testimony that God is the one who raised up Jesus. We must be careful in our reading and preaching not to implicate all of the Jews when we read Peter saying “whom you had killed.” Rather, we must recognize Peter’s bold statement to the leadership of the council (which is the context of verse 27). Despite what earthly powers may have done, God has raised Jesus, handed over by this council to Pilate and sentenced to death. Authority and power come from God, not from earthly organizations. Peter declares that they are witnesses of this, and that Jesus was raised so that all might receive forgiveness.

This is the third week where part of Psalm 118 is included as a possible reading. These suggested readings have overlapped each other, and now we read the last part of Psalm 118 in vs. 14-29. This psalm celebrates what God has done, what God is doing, and what God will continue to do. God has answered prayers, God has made the unimportant now important, and God has not forgotten those who have been rejected by the world.

Psalm 150 is a wonderful song of praise for what God has done, calling for the use of musical instruments in a loud fashion, remembering that we are to proclaim to the world what God has done for all people. “Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!”

John 20:19-31 is a personal favorite Scripture passage. Poor Thomas always gets a bad rap, but when you look at Luke 24:41 and Matthew 28:17, there was more than one disciple who doubted. John just happens to name Thomas. If one looks at all the passages about Thomas in John’s Gospel, one can see a progression from absolute certainty to doubt. In many ways, this is the progression for many people who first come to believe. Eventually we do call into question some of the things we believe. Thomas has a real difficult time with who Jesus is, what Jesus was about, and the idea that Jesus could rise from the dead. Thomas wasn’t there that first evening, but he did show up a week later with the disciples. Who knows what happened in that week—perhaps the others persuaded him to come, or perhaps Thomas missed them and their company. Regardless, Thomas eventually seeks refuge with the company of believers—with the family of faith, even with his doubts. But Jesus does not rebuke Thomas, nor does Jesus punish Thomas, but just says, “Put your finger here and see my hands… do not doubt but believe.” Jesus further blesses those who have not seen but have “come to believe.” Jesus indicates that this is a progression, a process, of coming to belief. Thomas is a great example and model of our journey of faith—even in times of darkest doubt, we can still cling to hope and hang in there. Faith will see us through.

Revelation 1:4-8 is John’s introduction to his letter to seven churches. John proclaims Jesus as not only the Lord, the firstborn of the dead, the ruler of kings, but also as the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins… and made us to be a kingdom.” It is Jesus who makes us a community of faith, something beyond our church walls but into the whole world. It is Jesus who loves us and was willing to die, and now is resurrected. It is important to remember the context as Revelation is probably the most misquoted and misunderstood book of the entire Christian Bible. John is writing to these seven churches in their particular circumstance. But what we can learn is this: John is writing a warning to those living in the Roman Empire that we belong to a heavenly kingdom, another realm, and that to become complacent while living in empire fails to live into the promise of God. We must remember that it is to Jesus first that we belong. Throughout Revelation, John declares what happens to those who have become complacent, or indifferent, about the empire around them, for those who do not challenge the status quo: they have failed to live into the promise and challenge of Jesus.

While some books of the Bible we may know well enough to not have to do much research to preach from, I strongly suggest preachers look to commentaries when reading Revelation and do their exegetical work. It is all too easy to take Revelation out of context, and sadly many in churches have heard others do so.

I love preaching this Sunday—so many other pastors I know take their vacations this Sunday after the rigorous Holy Week and Lenten season, but I love to preach this Sunday. For me, this is the real stuff. After the resurrection, what’s next? What are we waiting for? We’ve been waiting a long, long time. Thomas is a real individual we can connect with, and the response of Jesus is loving as well as challenging: “Do not doubt, but believe.” We may not be as bold as Peter, and we may not be as certain as John, but we might at least have the courage of Thomas, to get back together with the other disciples, to wait and pray, and to receive encouragement to go forth and continue to proclaim the Good News of God’s Love.

Call to Worship

In times of great joy

 **We give thanks and praise to You, O Christ.**

In times of hardship and trial

 **We pray for strength and endurance, O Christ.**

In times of darkness and doubt

 **We pray for hope and courage, O Christ.**

In all of life’s journey

 **We know that Christ is with us.**

 **Christ has walked before us, Christ walks with us, and Christ will come again. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of the wanderers, the outcasts, and the naysayers: You know that we have our doubts. You know that we struggle in our faith. You know we fall short in our faithfulness and at times are tempted to throw in the towel of church, or to look to something else to fill that spiritual hollowness in us. In these times, help us to reach out to one another and to look to the community that You have created in us. Help us to restore one another’s faith by our faithfulness to Your ways of love and compassion, healing and forgiveness. Call us out of the darkness of doubt and help us to lean on each other for hope and perseverance. God of our ancestors, wandering Arameans named Abraham and Sarah: guide us on this journey of faith. In times of doubt, bring faithful people to us to encourage us. Help us to encourage others. Help us, most of all, to stick together in the darkest of times, for we know Your light shines in the darkness. In the name of Jesus, our Risen Savior, who loves and forgives us, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from 2 Corinthians 4:16, 18)

So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day… because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.

The darkness is temporary, the light is eternal. Know that you are forgiven, renewed, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

Author of Salvation, You seek to lead us to the light, You seek to show us Your love in every way imaginable; You seek us when we are lost and wandering. We thank You for the prophets in our midst who guide and challenge us; for the sojourners of faith who do not give up. Write in our hearts the words of assurance when we have our doubts. Write in our lives the passages of hope when we feel hopeless. Write in us the promise of new life that flows in our blood and breath: the promise of life that lives in all creation. We know we can start again, we can make things new, and we live with the hope of the resurrection. We know this. Remind us of this again and again when we forget. In the name of Jesus, our constant companion on this journey of faith, we pray. Amen.