

Holy Week Homilies

March 24th thru April 1st, 2018



Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church

Mount Holly, New Jersey

Sunday of the Passion/Palm Sunday

March 24th & 25th



Title: *Another Jesus*

Text: Mark 15:6-15

Pontius Pilate was the Roman Procurator...the Governor of Judea. He was the human face of the Roman Empire in the region. And, as Governor, Pilate wielded unlimited political power...including the power to administer the death penalty. Yet...inexplicably, Pilate relinquished some of his unlimited power when he allowed that angry crowd to decide who would live and who would die that Friday afternoon. Pilate empowered the crowd to decide between Jesus of Nazareth and Jesus Barabbas. Did you know that some of the earliest and the most reliable manuscripts of the four New Testament Gospels confirm that Barabbas' first name was also **JESUS**! And, according to the Evangelists Mark and Luke, Barabbas was a terrorist...an assassin. He had been arrested, tried, convicted and sentenced to die for the murder of a Roman soldier.

I think it is interesting and certainly ironic that Pontius Pilate authorized the crowd to choose between two death row prisoners named **JESUS**...Jesus Barabbas-the popular revolutionary who wasn't afraid to use violence to fight the hated Roman occupiers...and Jesus of Nazareth-the prophet, preacher and 'Suffering Servant of God'. The crowd was asked to choose between two convicted criminals named JESUS-Jesus Barabbas-who believed in the power of the sword and believed violence and coercion were the only way to achieve his political ambitions...and Jesus of Nazareth-who believed in the power of love and taught that love was the most powerful force in the universe. How interesting and ironic that the people of Jerusalem were asked to choose between two men named **JESUS**-Jesus Barabbas who was a realist and who wanted to destroy his enemies...and Jesus of Nazareth—who was an idealist who taught his disciples to love their enemies! And I wonder...if you and I had been in Jerusalem on that fateful Friday more than 2000 years ago...if we had been a part of the crowd...which **JESUS** would we have chosen...Jesus Barabbas (the popular revolutionary)...or Jesus of Nazareth (the one called THE CHRIST)...I wonder...



Maundy Thursday

March 29th



Text: John 13:1-15

Title: *Peter's Protest...*

There are a few facts about Jewish hospitality in the first century that we need to know if we are to understand what is going on in our Gospel reading for Maundy Thursday. Specifically, there are three things we need to know.

#1. There was nothing that was more important in Jewish culture in Jesus' day than the absolute obligation to provide hospitality...especially to visitors and guests.

#2. It was the expectation that hosts would make provisions for the feet of his guests to be washed.

#3. Washing of feet was considered a task to be performed by the lowest and least significant servant of the household...the servant with the least seniority. It was an objectionable task equal to taking out the garbage or cleaning the cat's litter box.

Now, with those facts as background, the question I would like for us to ponder for a few moments is this...exactly why did Jesus (in the middle of the meal) get up from the table...take off his outer garment...wrap a towel around his waist...pour water in a basin and, one by one, begin to wash the feet of his disciples? Why would Jesus do such a thing? What do you think? I think he did it for one simple and fairly obvious reason...the disciples were all sitting around the table with mud on their feet! Apparently, in their haste to make plans for the Passover meal, no one had thought about making arrangements for dirty, dusty feet to be washed! And the disciples were too proud to perform this objectionable and disgusting task. Jesus noticed this and, like the good teacher that he was, seized the opportunity and began to wash the disciples feet. So, Jesus began and everything went fine until he got to Simon Peter...and Peter flatly refused to allow his feet to be washed...*No way, Jesus...you will never wash my feet*, Peter protested. On the surface, it appears to be a protest rooted in humility...Peter's refusal an acknowledgment of Jesus' identity and his objection to the idea of the Son of God and the Messiah performing a task relegated to the lowest and least significant slave in the household. What is more likely is that Peter's protest is rooted in his own pride. What Peter is saying is, "*Jesus, if I were in your position...I wouldn't be caught dead washing anybody's feet*".

Peter, at this late hour still didn't get it...he still didn't understand the kind of Messiah Jesus intended to be. And, because he failed to understand this...he also failed to understand that his own calling...his vocation as a disciple and Christ-Follower was about being a servant of the Suffering Servant of God!

My friends, I think it is very important that tonight, we remember that Jesus does not call us to perform acts of service as much as he calls us to be servants to one another and to a needy world. Can you appreciate the difference between performing acts of service and being a servant? All servants perform acts of service...but NOT all acts of service are performed by servants! To perform acts of service is about **DOING**...but to be servants is about **BEING**. And Jesus is always more concerned with **Who** we are...at the core and center than with what we do.

And tonight, on this Holy Thursday, we fulfill our mandate to be servants by allowing Christ to serve us. I know, it seems strange...it's like the student becoming the teacher or the patient becoming the physician. I can understand Peter's protest! But tonight, we need to remember that sometimes that is what servants are called to do...allow others to serve them. Tonight, Christ washes our feet...tonight he feeds us with his own body and blood and tomorrow he will die for us. But tonight, we serve by allowing Christ to be our servant...by allowing Christ to do for us what we can not do for ourselves...

Amen!



Good Friday

March 30th



Title: *They Took Him Down...*

Text: John 19:38

They took him down...his poor dead body and prepared him for his burial.

They took him down...his poor, pale body, drained of life, ashened, stained with his own life's blood.

His healing hands, now pierced and still. Serving hands that broke five loaves to feed five thousand. Holy hands, often folded in fervent prayer. His poor, gentle hands, now pierced and still.

His poor torn feet, now bloodied and cold. Feet that walked weary miles to bring Good News to broken hearts. Feet once washed with a penitent's tears. His poor torn feet, now bloodied and cold.

His Kingly head, made for a crown, now crowned with thorns. His poor, Kingly head now crowned with thorns.

His gentle breast, now pierced by spear thrust, quiet and still. His poor, gentle breast now quiet and still.

His piercing eyes, now dark and blind. Eyes of compassion, warming the soul. Fiery eyes burning at sin. Tender eyes, beckoning sinners. His piercing eyes, now dark and blind.

His matchless voice, fountain of the Father's thoughts, now stopped and still, to speak no more. Silence now, where once had flowed wisdom and comfort, spirit and life. His matchless voice stilled to speak no more.

They took him down, his poor, dead body, and prepared him for his burial...and they buried him in a borrowed tomb...and they thought that it was the end...BUT IT WASN'T THE END...IT WAS ONLY THE BEGINNING...*Amen!!*



Good Friday (3 Hour Ecumenical Service)

March 30th



Title: *Father Forgive Them* (the First Word from the Cross)

Text: Luke 23:24

Jesus' first word from the cross on that fateful Friday afternoon more than 2000 years ago was, according to the Evangelist Luke, a prayer...a passionate plea to God the Father that God would forgive and pardon His executioners...

Dr. Robert Coles, child psychiatrist, professor @ Harvard University and Pulitzer Prize winning author tells an amazing story about a young 6 year old girl named Ruby Bridges that he met in New Orleans, LA. In the fall of 1960.. Ruby's claim to fame was that she was the first black child to attend an all-white elementary school in LA following the 1954 historic Supreme Court decision, Brown vs. the Board of Education which ruled that segregated public education and the doctrine of separate but equal was unconstitutional.

Ruby's family were share croppers in Mississippi Delta, and they moved to New Orleans in the 1950's following the collapse of the agricultural economy in Mississippi Delta Region.. Ruby mother was a house maid and her father a common laborer. Together they barely scratched out and existence.

Following a court order, Ruby entered the William T. Frantz Elementary school on Monday, November 14th, 1960. She was the only child to go to school that day...all of the other parents kept their children home, fearing violence. Ruby was escorted from the school bus into the building by armed US Marshalls because the local police would not guarantee her safety. When Ruby arrived at the school that morning she was greeted by an angry crowd of white adults who were screaming at her...threatening her. They shouted, "*if you go into the school we're going to get you...we're going to kill you*". One white parent actually threatened to poison her! Well Ruby wasn't intimidated...she marched into school that day like a little soldier. Barbara Henry (from Boston, Mass.) was the only teacher in the school who would agree to teach Ruby. So Ruby and Mrs. Henry and the principal spent the entire day in the principal's office. At the end of that day, the Federal Marshalls returned to escort Ruby back on the bus, and the same crowd of angry adults were there screaming obscenities, threatening this tiny child. And this went on for several months...each morning when Ruby arrived at school and each evening when she left...the same angry crowd taunting her...threatening her...verbally abusing this tiny child.



Good Friday Homily Continued...

One morning, before Ruby entered the school, she paused and appeared to say something to the crowd. Whatever she said, incited the crowd to even deeper anger. The situation got so ugly that the Marshalls drew their weapons and rushed Ruby into the school. That afternoon, Dr. Coles interviewed little Ruby. He said, “*Ruby, what did you say to the crowd this morning that made them so incredibly angry?*”. Ruby replied, “*I didn’t say anything to the crowd*”. Dr. Coles, said, “*Ruby, I spoke with Mrs. Henry who said she saw the whole thing...she said she saw your lips moving, if you weren’t talking to the crowd, who were you talking to?*”. Ruby said, “*I was talking to God*”. Dr. Coles was surprised, “*You were talking to God*...”*That’s right*”, Ruby said, “*I was talking to God*”. Dr. Coles said, “*So, Ruby, what did you say to God*”. Ruby said, “*I asked God to forgive these people, because they didn’t know what they were doing*”. Dr. Coles was stunned. When he regained his composure, he mumbled, “*Ruby, why in the world would you ask God to forgive these people who have been abusing and threatening you each morning when you arrive at school and each afternoon when you leave school?*”. Ruby paused...considered Dr. Coles question for a few moments, and then she smiled and in a voice barely audible she replied, “*Because...when Jesus faced an angry crowd on Good Friday, that was the prayer that he prayed...**Father, Forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing**...Amen...*”



Easter Sunday (April 1st, 2018)



Text: Mark 16:1-8

Title: **Beyond Belief...Practicing Resurrection!!**

Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth...do you believe the improbable message that the young man, dressed in white, delivered to Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome on that first Easter morning “*He is not here...He is Risen*”? Friends, this is, without a doubt, the central doctrine of our Christian faith. There is no question that Christianity stands or falls on the historical fact of the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth...but do you believe it...do you really believe it??

I may be totally wrong (that is always a possibility), but I suspect that most of you are here this morning because you believe the Gospel story we just heard...you believe what the Creeds of the Church confirm...that Jesus was crucified...he died and was buried and on the third day...on the third day he rose from the grave. You believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and have made this truth the foundation of your life and faith and you hope for the future. But some of you may not believe it at all...you may believe it is nothing more than wishful thinking...a pious myth perpetuated by the Church for more than 2000 years, but somehow it seems right and good to be in church on Easter Sunday so you came. Some of you may want desperately to believe it...but, somehow the whole idea of a dead person rising from the grave is, well, unbelievable. Whatever your reason for being here this morning, I want you to know that I/ we (the people of St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church) are very, very glad that you are here (and we hope you will come again sometime soon), and I want you to know that what really matters most this morning is not what you say you believe ...or don’t believe or what you would like to believe...what matters most is what you **DO** with what you say you believe (or don’t believe or would like to believe)...

Friends, believing in the Resurrection by itself is not enough...it is never enough. If you came here this morning believing or not believing or wanting to believe, then chances are very good that you will leave exactly as you came and nothing will change...NOTHING! Believing in the Resurrection is not enough...it is never enough. So let me suggest an alternative to simply believing in the resurrection...let me suggest a way to move beyond belief!

Wendell Erdman Berry (does that name ring a bell with any of you? It didn’t with me until this past week, but now Wendell Erdman Berry is one of my “heroes of the Faith”). Wendell Berry is a novelist, poet, environmental activist and farmer from Kentucky. Back in 1991 Berry wrote a magnificent poem with an outrageous title: ***Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front***. It’s not the title but the final two words of Berry’s poem that have captured my attention and imagination...the final two words are: ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION...PRACTICE RESURRECTION! PRACTICING RESURRECTION***...it is something all of us can do (whether we believe or don’t believe or want to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth)...we can all ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION!***

Wendell Berry says we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we love God and love our Neighbor and love the World and love someone who doesn’t deserve to be loved! I say we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we notice and care for the lost/lonely/forgotten people...people who given up hope. I say we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we do what we can not to build walls but to dismantle the artificial walls that divide and separate us from each other. I say we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we do what we can to repair the damage of broken relationships (in our families/our communities/our churches and our world.. I say we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we “*strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being* (regardless of who they are or where they come from). My friends, I say we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** when we are kinder/gentler/more compassionate/more generous and less judgmental toward our fellow human beings than we have to be or than anyone expects us to be!

Friends, believing in the Resurrection is not enough...it is never enough...if we are not willing to ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION***. But here is the great Good news on this Easter Sunday...here is the great Good News for those who have the courage to just try to Practice Resurrection. When we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION***, we act our way into a new way of thinking...a new way of being...we have a change of heart!! When we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION***, we discover that our frail and fragile faith is fortified...our hope is restored...when we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION*** and our relationship with the crucified and risen Christ is renewed and strengthened and we are transformed...we become new creatures in Christ. When we ***PRACTICE RESURRECTION***, we proclaim to a skeptical and unbelieving world...a world that can never seem to get beyond Good Friday, the truth and the breath-taking Good News of Easter...***Christ is Risen...HE IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA!!***

So...***PRACTICE RESURRECTION!!***

Amen...

