

Second Sunday of EASTER, March 30, 2008
Acts 2: 14, 22-32; Psalm 16: 1 Peter 1:3-9; John 20:19-31
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Before we look at today's specific reading, let's back track for a moment and put today's gospel in context.

After Jesus was crucified the apostles split, hid behind locked doors, and then returned to Galilee to their fishing. Some time later, with their experiences of Jesus they concluded that Jesus was alive and they began to tell this story and remind people of what it was like when Jesus walked with them on the road.

Some twenty years later, Saul, who was converted to this new sect and had taken some time to reflect on it, changed his name to Paul and began to preach to the Gentiles and founded churches without permission of the apostles in Jerusalem. His understanding of Jesus was that Jesus was the Messiah for whom the Jewish community had been waiting. Paul's focus was the death/resurrection experience of Jesus.

About ten years later, after the revolt in Jerusalem in 66AD and before the fall of the Temple in 74 AD, we have the first Gospel of Mark. It may not have been the first gospel but it's the earliest Gospel we have to date. According to Mark, Jesus is the Son of God and his ministry was filled with mighty acts. However, his use of the title Son of God was not the same as we understand it today.

Matthew then wrote a Gospel in about 85 AD which is something of a manual of Christian teaching in which Jesus is portrayed as the fulfillment of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is Israel's royal Messiah through whom the true Israel can obtain divine forgiveness and fellowship. From this point of

view, Jesus is seen as being in the line of David, and the legitimate heir to David's throne

Other gospels were written and different understandings of Jesus began to develop throughout the Roman Empire and along the Mediterranean coasts. Luke was not so much writing a Gospel as writing to a person named Theophilus. The name Theophilus means "lover of God" and it seems he may have been a Roman official

Luke states at the beginning of his gospel, *Since many others have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the beginning were eye witnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*

Luke reflects a developing understanding of Jesus as the divine-human Savior whose compassion and care was for all people. Jesus' genealogy is not just going back to Abraham but to Adam and Eve, therefore Jesus belongs to the whole world and this is reflected in his interaction with Samaritans, women, Gentiles, and Romans.

Other Gospels were written and over time these gospels were considered to be not orthodox. The gospels of Mary, Phillip, Judas, The Signs Gospel, The Sayings Gospel, etc. Over time a particular theological point of view began to be developed and prevailed and these gospels were lost to Christianity until they were found in bits and pieces from the 19- the 20th century. The last large group of them was discovered in the desert at

Nag Hammadi in December of 1946 and are known today as the Gnostic gospels. Many of these gospels were known about, but only because early Church leaders quoted them in their writings to point out, from their point of view, how heretical these gospels were.

One of these Gospels was the Gospel of Thomas. Some scripture scholars believe that the Gospel of John was written in opposition to the Gospel of Thomas since Thomas makes Jesus out to be very human. In John's Gospel, Thomas is seen as a doubter. When Jesus tells the disciples that he is leaving and they know where he is going, Thomas speaks up and says *we don't know where you are going, how can we know the way?* Then, after the resurrection, Thomas is described as the one who doubts the resurrection until he puts his hands in the place of the nails etc.

John's gospel is one written by a mystic. John does not use the word 'miracle' but rather sign. Each sign, or miracle, points to Jesus' divinity. He presents Jesus as one whose beginning was with God in the beginning, active in creation, the light of the world and the life of the world. John had a simple reference for his gospel and that was to make it clear to those who read it that he was writing it so that people would believe in Jesus. He ends his gospel with the statement, *Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 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.*

That is the simplicity of John's gospel, the beauty of it and its depth. John makes a clear case that Jesus came from God, came to earth,

knew all that was going to happen, and returned to God. Do you believe this? The Early church was not sure and, in 325, the Emperor Constantine brought the bishops together to clarify what they believed about Jesus and the end result was the Nicean Creed.

Many mainline churches recite the Nicean Creed on Sunday morning. Most of us know it off by heart. But do we believe it? Is our belief merely intellectual consent or does it really make a difference in our lives? We believe there are speed limits and term limits and to live within one's means. Yet the reality is that we break speed limits, ignore term limits and are in debt over our eyes individually and as a country.

What is John expecting of us when he writes: *these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah?* Many people believe Jesus did what the scriptures report; they believe in Jesus but they do not attend church, they do not seem to be touched by the meaning of this beyond intellectual acknowledgement that says something to the effect: "John, I think you're right, Jesus is the Messiah. Isn't that nice. Where are we going for coffee?"

The 'Speaking Of Faith' Podcast reports this week that, "In a recent Pew poll, a growing segment of Americans defined themselves as atheist, agnostic, or - most predominantly - "nothing in particular." And the 14 percent of Americans who called themselves "nothing in particular" in the Pew poll are not definitively areligious. The point is, their spiritual and ethical bearings can be taken seriously even if they cannot be classified."

The creed which we will recite shortly and the Gospel we read which was written so that *we may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah*

is in fact difficult for many individuals to accept in today's world both inside and outside of the religious community called Christian.

One might well ask, "What happened?" "Where did we go wrong?" "Did we go wrong?" Of these three questions the easiest to answer and the most honest to answer is the first. The last two are designed to put blame on one person or another; one generation or another, when in fact no one and no particular generation is to blame.

What happened is that somewhere in the third or fourth century it was decided that there was only one way to believe and that all others were heretics. Books were destroyed, burned, buried and a particular point of view about church and God developed and was accepted as the only true voice. However, this was a Western point of view and the Eastern point of view was ignored. In terms of culture, Christianity is a Romanized, Latin way of seeing the world and religion. It is as if there is only one viewpoint and it is ours. We ignored and ignore the presence of God in the religions of India and other Eastern cultures to the point where it is now coming back to haunt the Western Institutional Church.

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? It certainly means more than intellectual consent to his reality in life and his resurrection. It means a deep understanding of his words and actions. As Christians we have a failing grade in understanding what we refer to as the Old Testament and as a result we even more so fail to understand the New Testament. To believe in Jesus is to know and understand Jesus in the context of his time and the scriptures that formed his mind and heart and soul.

Today we are living in a pluralistic society not unlike the one in which John wrote his gospel. To day we have a challenge to make the gospel relevant to those growing in a technological informational world that is rapidly changing. We have in our churches a clash of cultures and a clash of worldviews and, while this is not necessarily a bad thing, it nonetheless is a challenge for all of us to deal with the meaning and implementation of our faith in God and in Jesus our Lord .

To believe in Jesus in a way *that we may have life*, is to believe in Jesus, his words and actions, and make them our own as we work to make this world a better place in which we live and for those who come after us; it is to have belief in action; belief that shows those around us that Jesus' life, death and resurrection has meaning even after two thousand years and will continue to have meaning despite of and because of the changing circumstances of our life.