

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places...

I am the way and the truth and the life.”

With these words Jesus tries to comfort his disciples,

and to prepare them for the inevitable end they all see coming.

He had been speaking earlier that evening of his betrayal and departure

but now he has moved on to trying to convince his followers

that death is not the end they fear,

but a new beginning.

This new viewpoint is at the heart of faith

and it is something that we struggle with in our own day and age,

no less than the disciples did in theirs.

And now after our experience of the COVID pandemic,

our fear of death may be even more imminent, more poignant.

How can the torture and death on the cross of Jesus of Nazareth

be an occasion for joy?

Let me digress a bit.

We in the church do a great job with Lent.

It starts with Ash Wednesday -

“Remember that dust you are and to dust you shall return,”

and ends with the Easter acclamation,

shouted out half way through the Great Vigil of Easter -

“Alleluia! Christ is risen.”

Lent is a time of somber reflection, or as the prayerbook says,

a time of “self-examination and repentance;

prayer, fasting, and self-denial;

reading and meditating on God's holy Word,"

and as I said,

I think we do a pretty good job with it.

But in our hearts, we are an Easter people;

A living embodiment of the resurrection.

Lent is but a time of preparation for the main event!

We are now in the midst of the great fifty days of Easter,

our great season for celebration of the resurrection

that starts with that Easter acclamation,

and ends with the arrival of the Holy Spirit

on the Day of Pentecost.

Do you know what we are supposed to be doing during the Great Fifty Days?

Two things really.

One on the outside and one on the inside.

Inside we are to be reflecting on our baptismal vows

and how we can incorporate them into everything we do.

Normally we renew these vows at the Great Vigil of Easter and on Easter Day.

Normally we would renew them again on Pentecost.

Like bookends,

these two liturgical activities give shape and power to our reflections.

I thought I might help you a bit in your internal work.

As I review these vows,

reflect on how they are alive in your own heart

and how they might guide the activities of your everyday life.

If you've got a prayer book handy,

you might want to turn to page 292 and follow along.

If not, don't worry, I'll keep you posted.

First, we renounce evil and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ.

It almost seems redundant, I know,

but it's the core on which everything else is built.

Next we break up the Apostles creed,

also known as the baptismal creed, into three parts,

one for each person of the Holy Trinity.

Again, all of this is pretty straight forward.

The creed is the best shorthand we have

for summing up about 250 years of theological wrangling

on the nature of God as we understand God,

which is to say, the Holy Trinity.

To be fair, there is a lot in there

(more than enough for a whole raft of sermons),

but I want to spend my time this morning

reflecting on the 5 action statements that follow the creed.

They focus on action;

not what you think or believe, but what you do!

The first is, "Will you continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship,

in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?"

We always used to think of this as agreeing to attend church regularly,

but it is so much more than just church.

Like all of these promises we respond with, "I will, with God's help."

This helps us remember that the baptismal covenant is,

at its core, about relationship, and not about church but about life.

Our next promise is "Will you persevere in resisting evil,

and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?"

For me, the most important word in this sentence is "whenever."

If you are to persevere you must know that you will fall,

but you must also know that this does not end the relationship.

Like the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son,

God is always waiting to run back to you the moment you turn  
and raise you up in those almighty arms of love.

How are you living out this promise?

Are you forgiving as you have been forgiven?

Our next promise is, “Will you proclaim by word and example  
the Good News of God in Christ?”

The word that stands out to me here is “proclaim.”

Proclamations are by their very nature, obvious.

Is your life an obvious example of what it means,  
what it really means, to be a follower of Jesus?

It should be.

You promised it would be... with God’s help.

If you are feeling like you’re a little behind the curve here,

well... return to promise two, and then try a little harder next time.

Next comes “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons,  
loving your neighbor as yourself?”

This one can be a real challenge at times.

At the core of this promise is the belief that Christ is found in all people.

All people.

And we agree that no matter how hard it is to see Christ in the other,  
we will do our best

and persevere to seek out and serve Christ in that person.

You don’t have to live very long to learn how truly daunting this task can be.

To dismiss anyone for any reason is to dismiss Christ in them.

And finally, “Will you strive for justice and peace among all people,  
and respect the dignity of every human being?”

As much of a challenge as our last promise was,  
this one takes the cake.

This one demands our very best.

With this promise we agree to strive to set up systems  
that build upon the way that Jesus lived,  
so that even those who don't believe,  
those who have never even heard the good news  
can, nonetheless, reap the benefits of his saving grace.

These are the promises we make  
as we graft ourselves into the body of Christ at our baptism.

This is what being a follower of the way looks like  
when we are on our best behavior.

Reflecting on, and rededicating ourselves to this higher purpose  
is the great inner work of the Easter season.

But what about the outside work?

Sadly, this is where all too often we Episcopalians drop the ball.

Perhaps it comes from the reserve of our English upper crust roots, who knows.

On the outside we are supposed to be maintaining and nurturing  
a spirit of joy and of celebration.

This special joy  
that comes with the breaking of a fast  
and the celebration of a holiday,  
is meant to be carried on throughout the whole fifty days of Easter.  
And more, it is a joy that should be shared with abandon.

Now,  
if you're not sure what that this level of joy looks like,  
or if you need a reminder,  
I have an exercise for you.

I am pretty sure I have shared this with you before,  
but we could all use a refresher.

Find out what time the local grade school lets out for the day.  
Get there about a minute or so before that time

and place yourself in the schoolyard near a door.  
When you hear the bell ring, get ready to be over run by joy.  
Even before the children erupt from the door,  
    (and there really is no other word for it),  
        you can feel the joy building to a fever pitch within.  
The first children out the door are the racers,  
    the brightly burning lights of the playground.  
Soon they are followed by clumps of various sizes  
    all talking and laughing, nearly at the top of their lungs.  
In no time at all the school yard is filled with a boiling mass of joy.  
There is an urgency that belies the reality  
    that this happens every day.  
        They play like there will be no tomorrow,  
            like today is all they have.  
You may know that Alleluia is what Easter is all about.  
    But it can be easy to forget what Alleluia is really all about.  
        A school yard in the afternoon is the embodiment of Alleluia.  
When was the last time you allowed yourself to feel that kind of joy,  
    or shared that joy with anyone else?  
It is a joy that is not easily contained,  
    and definitely hard to control.  
Maybe that is why we are afraid of it,  
    or at least skeptical of it.  
It seems that some folks just can't allow themselves to be happy;  
    won't trust themselves to be happy.  
Well, as my mom always used to say,  
    "They're more to be pitied than censured."  
Easter is to be our time of abundant joy.  
    The time when Alleluias bubble out of us with no warning.

Sadly, we don't have much time left.

Pentecost is coming

and we will have to go back to being grim realists again.

And so I enjoin you, while we still have time,

live your life with the joy of Easter, the joy of a child.

Share the good news with those around you.

Invite someone to church;

not because you should,

but because you want to share the joy you have found!

And hey,

if you want to keep having fun

and living with Easter joy in your heart even after Pentecost,

that's ok too.

It seemed to work for Jesus.

And who knows,

that might even be what he was really talking about

when he said I am the way,

and the truth,

and the life!

Amen.