

Sermon for Easter II, Year B, 2021
The Rev. Dr. Jeanine Driscoll
St Thomas of Canterbury Episcopal Community
Gospel Text: John 20:19-31

Last week, a headline absolutely captured my attention: *It's time to re-think American Churches*¹ and it opened into data about the declines in church membership and attendance and what the implications are for American religious organizations. Actually, there's no better time to re-think American Christian churches than in the Easter Season. And this is particularly relevant, urgent for the congregation of St Thomas.

Consider that from the earliest years of Jesus movement, those who had just been initiated into the body of Christ received additional, intensive instruction in the sacraments, in scripture, in spiritual practices. For everyone involved, those who had just been initiated, those who had been with Jesus, those who heard and believed what the apostles were declaring... for all these folks, participating in the community of believers, following the Way centered their individual and communal lives. The Resurrection, the annual feast of Easter was not an occasion for a full out brunch or spiral ham dinners with green bean casseroles. It was a celebration of God in Jesus vanquishing death forever and ushering in a new way of living and dying and committing to this new Way, the Way.

Consider with me: every time we gather for Holy Eucharist, we declare that we believe that Christ Jesus has died, Christ Jesus is risen, Christ Jesus will come again! Christ Jesus is risen... **present tense**. How does this celebration of Holy Eucharist, a celebration of Jesus life, death, and resurrection, how does this core profession of faith influence your present, daily life, how does it shape your interactions with others? Do you realize that each time you receive Holy Communion, you receive the body of Christ! So, hear Jesus saying to you what

¹ See Adam Taylor Russell: It's Time to Re-Think American Churches;
<https://sojo.net/articles/it-s-time-rethink-american-churches>, retrieved the week of April 4, 2021

he said to his apostles: *receive the Holy Spirit, as the Father has sent me so I send you*². **Again present tense: so I send you...**

Our receiving the Holy Spirit, Jesus commissioning us, these sacred stories in scriptures, the sacred traditions passed on from Jesus to the apostles to the first generations of the Jesus movement all the way through to us today... this is what ought to be at the center of our common life. This is the central, defining story: Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again. The gospel, the scripture stories of how the experience of Jesus completely informed and transformed peoples' lives... that's the story that ought to be at the center of our shared life. So that we share with one another and with others how the experience of Jesus completely informs and transforms our lives.

It's time to re-think American churches. It's time to re-think St. Thomas of Canterbury... the headline I cited a few moments ago opened into surveys³ about the decline in church membership and attendance. And in the surveys, **religious preference** is a key term. Does research imitate life or does life imitate research: preference... for me, maybe for you, preferences connotes options: *I* prefer a certain brand of running shoes, *I* prefer a manual transmission to an automatic one, *I* prefer cheerios to wheaties. However, I don't prefer clean water, I don't prefer oxygen, *I vitally depend on, need* clean water and oxygen.

For the earliest followers in the Jesus movement, their faith was not a preference, their faith was vital aspect of their lives--**it was the life of their lives!** Our faith centered in the teachings of Jesus, our faith guided by our Baptisms, renewed in each Holy Eucharist **ought to be the life of our lives.** And because we have such a faith, we participate in a faith community. And our participation is necessary, vital part of our lives... it's not a preference! It's a proclamation! It's a practice! It's a commitment to Jesus, to deepening our

² See John 20:19-31

³ See: <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx> and Fetzer Institute, September 2020, "Study of Spirituality in the United States". Both sources retrieved the week of April 4, 2021

relationship with Jesus, to supporting one another in this holy work, and to offering our lives as Jesus' hands and heart in the world around us!

In a few minutes, you'll hear me pray Eucharistic Prayer C and you'll be praying it too:

*Deliver us from the presumption of coming to this Table for solace only, and not for strength; (that is, the presumption of coming to this table to feel good about myself/ourselves or because we are entitled to come to this table or deserve to come here) for pardon only, and not for renewal. (forgive me, forgive us for coming to this table asking for forgiveness without committing to changing our behaviors, to committing to making amends and moving forward). Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name. (Make us **one** body, **one** spirit—**together**... to serve the world as Christ's hands and heart, **to co-minister with Jesus Christ!**). This is not about individualistic preferences and endeavors, this is about co-ministering with Jesus and with one another.*

If being the church has become a preference:

something to do when we feel like it, some place to go to feel good or get warm fuzzies... if being church has become something we feel we're entitled to or deserve to have, if being church has stopped being the place where we explore what it means to live out our baptismal promises...

if being church has become a social club or an outlet for power plays of one sort or another... if being church has stagnated into waiting to die in order to go over the wall...

if being church has become keeping the doors open because we can rather than **because we offer a vital ministry and a distinctive witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus**, then **we're a very far way** from living according to **the Way**, as the earliest Jesus movement was called in the Acts of the Apostles.

Receive the Holy Spirit—as the Father has sent me, so I send you. How do you want to express your response to Jesus' commission...do you hear that, Jesus' commission? He's inviting us into co-missioning with him. Jesus did not say: what do you prefer; what do you deserve; what do believe you are you entitled to... nope. He said, "*receive the Holy Spirit, as the Father has sent me, so I send you*". How do you want to co-mission, co-minister with Jesus and with one another⁴... Amen!

⁴ Maybe a more basic question is "how much do you want to co-minister with Jesus and one another", even more basic, "do you want to co-minister with Jesus and one another"?