

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

ARE WE DONE YET?
Sermon for Easter 2C: Jn 20:19-31
LPC, 4/7/13

We come here this morning as always to worship God, but also, on this particular morning, to baptize a baby, Xavier Lee Johnston. I have in the past, been approached by parents who want to baptize their baby, and they speak of the baptism as “getting him done.” I want to stress that this didn’t happen this time and I wouldn’t expect it to happen with this particular family.

But let me state categorically, for today and for forever, that a baby is not like a set of acrylic nails or anything else you get “done”, and baptism is not a procedure like an inoculation or a facelift. Baptism is not a completion, but a beginning.

Baptism is the beginning of an individual’s life in Christ. That means the person is publicly recognized as a member of God’s family, and a member of Christ’s body, the church. With each baptism a journey begins that the church is honor-bound, indeed blood-bound, to support, with education and inclusion and love.

Unlike some other branches of Christianity, the Episcopal Church baptizes babies, to show that the most helpless among us are no less children of God, and that the grace of God is not something that is earned by maturity, achievement or any other milestone. We baptize babies so that they will never know a time when they have not been included in God’s family.

Baptizing babies is an act of faith. We pray that they will grow in Christ. There is no guarantee that they will receive a Christian education, and deepen in faith and understanding as they grow. We don’t repossess children if their parents and godparents break the promises they make today to bring them up in the knowledge and love of God. We baptize in faith and we do our best to support the families, who, God knows, have a lot of other things to worry about as they raise their child. We make promises too.

And, as high schoolers are instructed to do at Catholic School dances, we leave room for the Holy Spirit. We expect that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide the baptized person throughout his or her life. Which means: we expect that person’s faith to grow and change. We expect our own faith to grow and change.

Furthermore, we expect our faith to grow and change into and through adulthood. Christian formation is not something we graduate from or outgrow. It does not end with confirmation, or graduating high school, or leaving home. We never know it all. We are never, this side of heaven, fully mature in the faith.

In today’s Gospel reading, we have the story of Thomas, as we always do the first Sunday after Easter. Thomas is an adult person whose faith evolves.

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Unlike Peter or Andrew or James or John or Matthew, we don't know what Thomas did before Jesus came into his life. All we know is that he was a twin. We can assume that like Peter, Andrew, James, John and Matthew, Thomas left his previous life to join Jesus during Jesus' earthly ministry. Thomas follows Jesus around for roughly three years with the other eleven. When Jesus is determined to go to Jerusalem where he will certainly be arrested, Thomas bravely suggests that all the disciples follow that they "may die with him." Then, at Jesus' crucifixion, we can assume that like the other disciples, Thomas' loyalty succumbs to fear. Like the other disciples he hides away.

Now Jesus is resurrected, but Thomas isn't around to see him the first time. So he's skeptical when his companions say they've seen him. We single him out and call him "Doubting Thomas," but he's really no worse than the other disciples, who didn't believe until *they* had seen Jesus alive. He's no more doubtful than Mary Magdalene, who at the empty tomb could not believe that Jesus was alive even when he stood in front of her.

But Jesus comes back to see Thomas and Thomas believes without even having to meet the criterion he himself had set: to put his hand in Jesus' wounds.

Legend has it that after Jesus' Ascension, Thomas traveled to evangelize the Parthians, Syrians and Malabar Indians.

We thus see a development in Thomas' faith: at first, a radical leap of faith in leaving his prior life, then loyalty to Jesus in his itinerant ministry, then a zealous commitment to die with Jesus, followed by falling away, fear, doubt, and skepticism. Then, through the direct intervention of Christ, his faith is rekindled, burning hotter than ever and inspiring him to a perilous, self-sacrificial journey.

Thomas' story shows us that faith, like the living thing it is, grows and falters, waxes and wanes, and finds its full completion only in the kingdom of heaven. Like Thomas, we mustn't expect our faith to remain static, any more than Xavier's faith will remain static as he grows into adulthood. In other words, we haven't arrived yet. We're not "done."

This means that when our faith doesn't feel quite like it once did, that doesn't indicate we have lost our faith. It means the Holy Spirit may be coaxing us on to something else. And our Baptism means, that there will never, ever, be a time when God is not with us.

The bad news is, we're not done yet. The good news is, we're not done yet.