

“JESUS – THE WAY, THE TRUTH & THE LIFE”
April 20, 2008 – 5 Easter - Grace Church, Haddonfield, NJ
Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

We often hear today’s Gospel and know it because of the use at funerals. But there is more to the text than just what to do when we face death. Herb O’Driscoll says that the common theme that plays itself out in the readings is, “How do we communicate our faith beyond ourselves?” In short, what does it mean to be a Christian?

The media gives us a few examples of faith in our world today. Have you noticed all the coverage of Pope Benedict’s visit to the United States? There is tremendous excitement and interest. The Pope has drawn many young people, those eager for spiritual connection, to see him. There was the bold move by Benedict to meet some of the victims of clergy sexual abuse and to say he was sorry. Another example comes in the television evangelists who fill some airwaves. I am not comfortable with the likes of Joel Osteen and their “feel good” and “prosperity” gospels. There’s such a discrepancy between the lifestyles of these television preachers and the rest of us that they are being investigated by Congress over possible abuses. Where does our faith fit in today’s world? What does Scripture have to say to us and show us how to be a Christian in the 21st century?

The Book of Acts tells us the story about Stephen. He is one who shows us that the way of Christianity can easily involve pain, suffering and death when faith is expressed. Stephen stands up to speak about what he believes and is met with immediate conflict. He reminds us that Christians in the early faced martyrdom as the way. Less we think this is only to be found in our history, we must remind ourselves that Christians around the world are in immediate danger. Those in Iraq, Palestine, China and Africa come to mind. For some, the way is suffering and death.

Peter’s letter to shows a great deal of interest in the way being visible in the quality of life found in the Christian community. Peter says the way a church lives its life tells us a lot about what is going on. What a particular church is saying is not more important than what it is doing. I’ve been struck by the recent announcement by the Archdiocese of Camden that they will close or merge more than 50 churches in our area. I understand the problems: too few people in the pews; not enough clergy to go around; and, structures that are too expensive to maintain. What has also been interesting is the volume of letters to the editors, “Not my Church!” I see no call for more people in church, new ministries or more active faith, but the same plea, “Someone else, not mine.”

Less we think this is only a problem for our neighbors, we have to face this issue in our own diocese. Why is their this attachment only to the building? What are we to do when only 10-15 people are in the pews and they do nothing to interact with the rest of the community? Too often these places are very inward looking, exclusive chapels for people to feel comfortable and not challenge themselves to live out their faith. Too often these churches are nothing more than personal chapels. Is this the way? No growth means something has to change ... or die.

The Gospel of John presents with the evangelist’s way of thinking how to be Christians. Jesus shows us the way ... and he is the way. Jesus is the ultimate witness as he embodies what it is to be the way, the truth and the life. Jesus is the living example of how the way of

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faith is to be lived, and it has to do with our relationships with God, with him and with each others. What we might best do this morning is ask ourselves, “Where is Jesus in our lives?”

I know that I have some personal struggle that effect how I live out my faith. One for me is interfaith gatherings where I am asked to give a grace, or invocation or benediction. Do I mention the name of Jesus? Should I be careful not to offend? I was taught to be respectful of others, how does that impinge on my faith? The danger for me is that in being too careful, I don’t articulate my faith at all. We all wrestle with this every time we wonder if we mention our faith to family, friends or neighbors. Or do we politely refuse to mention faith at all?

We are called to be Christ centered, but are we? Who is Jesus for us? Eastertide shares with us stories of the Risen Lord. He appears to many people and what we see happening is the early shaping of the first Christian community. The challenge then is the same as it is now. We are asked to make Jesus unique and central to our understanding of faith. What exactly does Jesus Christ mean to us?

Maybe there is another way to approach this. Why do we come to Church? Dr. William Willimon says, “We want to see God!” But the problem is that God is invisible, unapproachable, infinite and inaccessible. John gives us an answer to this dilemma. For him, Jesus is not only the way to god ... Jesus is God! We have a full image of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Now we can begin to grasp the grand claim of Christianity. If we believe, that is, if we believe in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, then we’ve seen God. What I find key to John’s Gospel is that we are invited into relationship. A relationship with Jesus Christ brings us into a relationship with God.

If Jesus is not our way to God, if he is not our image and divine self revelation of God ... then what is? Is it democracy? Capitalism? A political party? Money? Self-sufficiency? Sex? Status? Power? Security? There seems to be an endless of other gods that could fill the bill for us. Where are we? Who is our god?

When I was growing up, the Methodist Church was the church of my childhood. I can remember one of the common practices that left an impression on me. It was the tradition of an altar call. Maybe you’ve seen one when a Billy Graham event was being televised. At some point, usually a climax, the clergy person would stand and announce, “If you accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, come forward now!” These were very powerful moments. People felt moved to come to the altar rail and have prayers offered for them!

How would you respond? Would we step forward? Or would we hold back, saying, “My faith is not for show.” But where in our lives is our faith visible? Are we so content to live in the place where our faith is in the background? The danger with this is that faith can

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become soft, or vague, or indefinable. Too often matters of faith don't get talked about. Why? If faith is so essential, why don't we talk about it?

Somewhere along the way we have lost sight of what John and the early Church discovered. It has to do with Jesus Christ. Here is Jesus, the way of a humble servant. His is the way of being inclusive, inviting and loving. This is God's way! Is it ours? Here is the Christ, the way of the cross. His way has to do with suffering and self-sacrifice. This is God's way. Is it ours?

John has presented us the way to be in relationship with God through Jesus. But there is a problem with John's Gospel. This passage has been used by people to attack and beat up others. I don't think it was meant to be used for attack but for affirmation. Before we begin to focus on others, we must examine ourselves. What we living when it comes to faith?

We would do best to ask ourselves is Jesus the way? Am I living it right now? I resent people who want down shove their version of faith down the throats of others ... especially when it is void of love, hope, forgiveness and other key elements of our Lord's teachings. I don't see this in Jesus. We are not called to be supreme, super pious or judgmental.

Jesus opens a way that is unique and life-giving. John is talking to the early disciples and the early Church. The issue John presents is not will outsiders be saved; it is whether the people inside the Church have a senses of distinctiveness (so says Walter Bruggeman). John was worked up over what he knew a Christian was called to be! Jesus is the one proclaimed as the one way to God ... to whoever is willing to listen! Are we listening? We can leave the faith of others to God (God can handle it). It's not up to us to judge.

At the center of Christianity is faith in Jesus Christ. We will continue to struggle, it's only human. Remember Thomas, he doubted, his question was show me the way. Jesus would say to him, I am the way! Philip says, show us God. Jesus says to him, don't you trust what you've already seen? To embrace Jesus as the way does not mean we won't still want proofs, or have doubts. John speaks to the early church and he speaks to us today.

Jesus is the way. For those of us here gather, looking for God, we can find God. It means that we have to accept Jesus, as Lord and Savior. It means that we have to be part of a Christian community, one that seeking to live into Jesus as the way. Finally, it means understanding the way has to do with a relationship with God, with Jesus and with each other. The invitation to the early Church still remains today for us.

So if we are here looking for God ... and we have heard the Word of God ... and have experienced the community ... What did we find?