

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Oh Lord, did you think this day would ever come? I mean, I never imagined this. When I pictured my ministry, never once did I imagine I'd be preaching to a dozen or two folks in one room and a whole bunch of households on screens. It reminds me of that guy Michael Buffer. You may not recognize his name, but I guarantee you've heard him. He's the slick-looking guy with a velvety baritone that introduces prize fights and wrestling main events with "Let's get ready to rumble!" I think he was even in Dumbo. Well, not only would he say "let's get ready to rumble," but he'd also set the stage by addressing "the thousands in attendance and millions watching at home on tv." Now, maybe our numbers aren't quite to those levels yet, but I still kinda feel like that. We've got a handful here and many more at home. And I suspect it's gonna be like that for a long while. I never imagined this. I imagined everyone here altogether. Maybe someone would ask to read a sermon once in a while or click through the archives on our website. But technology? In a service? You've lost your mind. No, I pictured that good old time religion, which mostly meant lo-tech. I pictured the church as a refuge from screens, a brief respite in an otherwise technology-heavy world. Of course, I'm not complaining. We have had to adapt to a changing world, one that has broken our go-to ways of doing things all over the place. It's no surprise that our go-to ways of doing church have had to change, too. What is a surprise, though, is just how well St. Thomas' has adapted.

I overheard a colleague early in the pandemic say "We never learned how to do *this* in seminary." And sure, we didn't learn how to use Zoom or preach to an empty room or provide last rites without going into a hospital. We didn't learn those particulars. But we can't fault seminaries for that. Because, while the world has changed drastically, our purpose in the world has not. In the face of Covid or injustice or inequality or fear or hatred or distrust or division or loss or death, our purpose remains the same: to proclaim the miracle of Easter. That Christ took on all it meant to be human, Christ took all that on, and died, and still came back to us. That God's grace pours over this world and calls us to unreasonable, intangible, stubborn hope. That God's Spirit blows through our lives and carries us in our love for each other and in our love for God. *That* we did learn in seminary. And what has floored me during this pandemic is that y'all had already learned so much of that, too. Zoom? Well, that's taken some learning. Even today as we change things up a little bit, we've got to adapt again. I don't know about y'all, but I'm ready to stop having to adapt. One day, maybe. But y'all learned all that Christian purpose stuff so fully long before Covid first struck. You had to've, otherwise, I can't imagine why you'd bother to sit through unfulfilling Zoom services and long-distance prayer gatherings. You know what we're about, and today we finally mark a long-awaited occasion. This is the first Sunday morning we've had in this building in exactly 400 days. Those hymnboards still mark the last time we sang together, and they're gonna stay put at the Third Sunday of Lent 2020 until we can adapt that, too. 400 days. Y'all. I feel like a dirty heathen if I go one week without stepping in a church. 400 days? Now that, that seminary did not prepare me for.

You know, I keep talking about seminary and what it prepared me for, or didn't, but I think I want to do something a little different with this time this morning. We Episcopalians like our sermons, but sometimes I think there's some wisdom from my grandma's Baptist Church that we could benefit from. When was the last time any of y'all heard a testimonial? It's been a minute, right? Me too. Maybe this won't be quite as compelling as some of the ones I heard growing up. I remember those could get pretty juicy. You'd have a soft spoken guy or a rambunctious lady get up and tell their story. None of them had much public speaking confidence, but by the time they'd rattled off a couple of lines and an introduction, they'd sort of settle in. This was a topic they knew quite a lot about, 'cause they were talking about themselves. I remember one that began

with the testifier telling a story so debaucherous that my mother blushed and white knuckled the pew in front of her. That was a good day in church.

I'm sorry to disappoint, but my testimony isn't that juicy. Even the juicier parts aren't all that exciting. Just normal people stuff. But I'll own it. I moved in this world with the assumption that I was, basically, at the center of everything. I was the star of my own movie, and other people and other things were there for me. People were just characters making cameos or a new sidekick on the scene. I'm sure a few of them got their own spin-offs, but I wasn't concerned with those. All I cared about was how they affected me. I wasn't terribly interested in God for a while there, either. I used to call myself an "Agnostic Unitarian," which sounded very cool to my teenage brain. Now, I think it was just kinda redundant.

I remember going into my priest's office one day. I walked right up to her desk and said, "Mother Barker, I don't think I believe in any of this crap." Only I didn't say crap. And, boy, did I feel like I'd accomplished something. Take that, church! But she didn't react. She just sort of shrugged and said, "Ok," and handed me a CS Lewis book to read. Not to convince me to come back into the fold, but because she thought I'd get a kick out of a story about demons stuck in deadend, middle management jobs. I read it, and I did get a kick out of it, and I had a ton of conversations with her that spanned all sorts of topics, but I still wasn't any closer to believing much at all about the Christian God. At least, I didn't think I was. She was slowly channeling something that I couldn't see in myself, and I didn't even know she was doing it. Well one night, I had a dream that I had died. I don't know how it happened or anything like that, I just know that I was dead. And there was nothing. I was conscious, fully aware, but all I saw was blackness on all sides, and I somehow knew that I would be there, alone in that blackness forever. I was in the void, but nothing looked back. I struggle to explain it, but I know I can communicate this: it scared me, like, a lot. It was such a mystical and all-encompassing dream, such a deeply troubling, haunting experience, that I left behind the "Agnostic Unitarian" label and got a little more serious about this whole Christianity thing. By no means is it a straight line from there to seminary to here, but if there is a moment in my life when I chose the path that would eventually lead to priesthood, I think it was there. I didn't wake up and decide to be a priest, of course, but I did wake up and decide to commit to something. I woke up and decided to commit to Christ. Every point on the journey since has its roots in that terrible dream.

But I want to be clear about something. I didn't choose to follow Christ because of fear, not exactly. I was afraid, yes, but I chose Christ because of the loving embrace he offers, the comfort of the psalmist who says "hide us under the shadow of your wings." There is so much in our world to be afraid of. There is so much to fret over. There is so much wrong, and broken, and seemingly irreparable. I mentioned this during Holy Week, but I gotta say it again, if it's up to me or you or even all of us at small-but-mighty St. Thomas', if it's up to us, then it's time to pack up the church and call it quits. We'll never make it if we take on all the problems of the world as our own. And we'll find ourselves falling into darkness and despair. But, if it's up to me and you and all of the people of St. Thomas' -- with God's help -- then we've got a chance. We've got more than a chance, 'cause we've picked the winning side. There is so much broken that can be made right in Christ. So much love and so much hope to share with the world. So much grace to give and comfort to offer. I don't know about y'all, but seeing all y'all come in this morning, I feel like I'm watching the mother hen of Matthew's Gospel gather all us chicks under her wings. We are gathered into this place of comfort and safety and gentle care. And those of you millions watching at home, though we can't see you in quite the same way, you're gathered in here, too, in a new way.

Y'all, how we do church has changed, of course it has. But why we do church has not. We remain here. We remain committed to each other and to our God. We remain committed to all those in our world that suffer. I don't know what your testimonies might look like, but I do know this: much as we stiff-upper-lip Epsicopalian

like to keep our personal stuff personal, the world needs us to testify in thought, and word, and deed. And so it is, in this church, in our homes, and in this beautiful village, we continue to proclaim the truth of this season. Alleluia! Christ is Risen!