

## **Sermon, Father William J. Albinger**

**March 30, 2008**

**Easter 2A 2008**

In the Name of our one living God, ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining:  
Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, our Gospel is John again. We get a lot of John after Christmas and Easter since he seems to be the lectionary's favorite theologian. Even though our bishop tries to avoid preaching on John because it is so dense, I have to admit to being fascinated by the complexity of John's Gospel. As I have said before, John's Gospel is different from the other three since it was written at a later time by a different community living in very different circumstances from the time of Jesus. To me it is almost like a palimpsest – a painting that is painted over another painting and after time the painting underneath begins to bleed through. John tells the Gospel – the experience of the living Christ – largely in the context of his own community's life, but the original story is there, underneath, giving it shape and its own energy.

How do we deal with our faith in this Risen Jesus when we live in a culture that has already moved onto Mothers' Day if it even bothered to stop to notice Easter? How do we speak of our faith in a culture for whom a cross or crucifix is a fashion accessory popularized by rock stars? John's community was also culturally isolated – largely Jewish followers of Jesus, they had been expelled from Judea by Rome, they were being cast out of the synagogues and community by their fellow Jews and they

were now surrounded by an alien gentile world – even in church. So maybe John really has something to say to us today.

John speaks of the disciples huddled together behind locked doors “for fear of the Jews”. Jesus suddenly is standing among them and his first words are “Peace be with you.” He shows them his wounds to prove it is he after the crucifixion. He again gives his peace and then he gives them their job description: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Next we have John’s version of Pentecost: He breathed on them and said. “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

This is followed by the story of Thomas who was absent and wouldn’t believe their testimony. When Jesus appears again a week later with Thomas present, Jesus shows not only that he knows what proof Thomas demands, but he freely offers himself to Thomas saying, “Do not doubt but believe.”

That’s a lot happening in just four paragraphs! The bishop is right; John is dense. Where to begin?

What words turn fear into joy and isolation into community? What words do we most long to hear? Well let’s start with those three little words; “I love you.” Taken in their deepest and most longed for sense, they are the words that mean that we are unconditionally accepted for who we are. They are the words of self-giving that represent total commitment and the words that engender total trust. *Shalom* – peace in Hebrew – means more than just the absence of conflict. It contains genuine concern for and good wishes towards the person being addressed. It is about being present to another, compassion, understanding and acceptance. Shalom is similar to our “aloha” which means a heck of a lot more than “hi”.

Some people are lucky enough to get all the love they need throughout all their lives. But that is pretty rare. Most of us need to hear those words – sometimes we need desperately to hear those words. Here, John tells us, when we really need to hear I love you – turn to the Risen Living Christ who is ever in our midst.

And if those three little words aren't enough sometimes, how about these three: "You are forgiven." Don't we all need to hear those words at times? Isn't one of the sharpest human pains knowing we have harmed someone and being unable to fix the harm and re-enter good relationship or being ourselves so deeply wounded? For John it is the gift of the spirit that allows the Christian community to exist only by being a community of forgiveness. "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.

I don't know about you, but I usually heard this text preached as biblical authority for the church to police and judge sins and forgive them – or not. But looking closely at the text of John, Jesus is addressing an unnumbered and unnamed group of disciples not just the eleven. When this text is read, I find that often the focus is almost exclusively on the one being forgiven and not on the one doing the forgiving. It makes it more of a unilateral transaction rather than relational. Forgiveness or the lack of it are relational and a bit like wrestling. If we got someone pinned to the ground with our foot on their neck, they are not going to go anywhere – and neither are we! If we fail to forgive, not only does the other lack forgiveness, but we will stay carry around the anger, hurt, frustration or other negative feelings within us. In short, we are all stuck and no one is going anywhere!

The drama of Thomas – his ability to move from doubt to belief – is miraculous. I think it is the great end to John's Gospel. It is a response, I think, not so

much to Thomas having his intellectual questions clarified, but a response to Jesus' "*Shalom*" – Peace "I love you" - Peace "You are forgiven." Remember, Jesus was abandoned by all his disciples. They felt deep shame and fear. But now relationship has been re-established and both can move forward.

John's community knew the pain of exclusion – of being thrown out of their Jewish community into the midst of a new and strange world. Perhaps that is why John ends his Gospel with this chapter (Chapter 21, most scholars believe, is a latter editing by another author). Love and forgiveness are the basic building blocks of his community. Servant leadership and being in relationship are central to John's view of the Christian community.

So maybe John has a lot to say to the Church right now. We are not called to agreement or uniformity. We are not called to perfect knowledge and understanding. We are not called to policing. We are called to love one another, we are called to forgiveness and we are called to a common meal of thanksgiving – the Eucharist.

For what purpose does the Church exist? When I was asking myself that question, I remembered that this is an anniversary date for me on the Church year. This is the fourth anniversary of my ordination as priest and the third anniversary of my first visit to Holy I. This gospel was the first one I preached on here at Holy I in April, 2005. I was on vacation and was called to do supply at the last minute. Oh my goodness, not only no time to prepare a sermon but no books! No computer and not even a Bible – thank God for the Gideons! Then I remembered the Molokai'i Times I picked up that Saturday afternoon at the Kalupapa Airport. There was a story in it about a guy who cooks burgers at the weekly aloha dinner for the hungry or lonely served at this church. A year earlier, he had been heading to Maui to do some time at

the Maui Correctional Facility. He boarded the ferry over to Maui, the *Maui Princess* with his ice pipe in one hand and a bible in the other. Somehow he changed during his time in prison. Why? Well, for one reason, peoples over thousands of years looked for God in their lives and wrote their experiences down in a book we now call the bible. He could read about their lives and struggles. Another reason is that someone loved him enough - hoped for him enough- to put that Bible into his hands and probably prayed for him while he was doing time.

Shalom – You are loved; You are forgiven. That’s the first part. The second part is where we the Church come in – “As the Father has sent me, I now send you...Receive the Holy Spirit. If you receive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” The Easter story includes now includes us and that is the Good News.

Amen.