

St. John's Episcopal Church
Jackson, Wyoming
Sermon for April 17, 2016 ~ Easter 4C
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

This is the Fourth Sunday of Easter, the middle Sunday of the season. And, on this middle Sunday, we find the Gospel reading asking a rather curious question for this time in the church year.

Today's Gospel brings us back to a day before the Crucifixion, as Jesus is walking in the temple. Again, the religious leaders gather around him questioning, perhaps taunting him. "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." There is a good chance that their questions lack sincerity. From our knowledge of the whole story, we assume that they do not believe Jesus is the Messiah. In fact, they believe that he is quite the opposite. They believe him to be nothing less than a heretic and troublemaker, perhaps even what today might be called a terrorist. They hope that he will confirm this by telling them plainly that he is the Messiah. And with this declaration he will give them permission to prosecute him and rid themselves of his annoying threat to their power and authority and to that of Rome.

Once again, however, Jesus refuses to take the bait. Instead, as he often did, he turned the question back to them, saying, "I have told you and you do not believe." How has he told them? His works, he says, testify to who he is. There is plenty of evidence, he assures them. The real issue, he tells them, is their own belief.

This is the question the Gospel brings to us this morning. Of course we do believe, don't we? And isn't this a rather peculiar time to ask the question? Here we are in the midst of the season of joyous belief. Easter is the celebration of victory over death, the awareness of our lives redeemed forever from the power of sin, fifty days of gratitude for penance paid and absolution guaranteed for all eternity.

It would be easy to sidestep this matter of belief. Instead, we could focus on the promise to believers with which this passage concludes. Believers, whom Jesus describes as his "sheep," hear his voice and follow him. In return, he gives them eternal life and they will never perish. No one may snatch them from his hand. But the question continues to tug at the back corners of our minds. Do we believe – and how? Are we followers of Jesus or are we merely admirers? Are we Christians or are we just *Christianish*?

Our Western mind has been formed by the notion that belief is based on evidence. The scientific method depends on the formulation of an hypothesis, which we then test by experimentation. If the data from the experiment confirms the hypothesis, we may be reasonably certain it is true. If the evidence fails to confirm the hypothesis, we must revise it or create a new theory. A belief is rooted in observation and evidence collected in support of it.

John's writing, however, says that even this will not be enough. After all, those to whom Jesus speaks have been observing him for some time now. Even Jesus acknowledges that the testimony of his works – the works of the Creator God – is not enough for this group.

If this is so, how does one get to be one of those sheep who knows the Master's voice, a member of the flock that cannot be snatched from his hand? The Gospel suggests that we need to act as though believing is a choice, the product of a free will rather than the prize in a debate. The time comes when evaluating the evidence must end. Eventually all the questions we have to ask become evidence only of our own procrastination. The deep chasm of uncertainty between the known and the possible has no bridge except our choice to believe, to trust the good news about Jesus to be true.

Throughout these fifty days of Easter, we are moving inevitably to the day of Ascension. It is the memory of these days, when the promises of the Resurrection walk and talk with us in certainty that must sustain us for the rest of the year. These are the days when we stand close to the flame of the Paschal candle so that we may look closely at the world in the light of its brilliance. We hold these memories of this world illumined by the promise of eternal life as mental photographs we can recall from memory in the dark days that come.

Today, in the midst of the stories of Christ's resurrection appearances, we are called to remember that these miracles, wrought by God's great gift, Jesus Christ, are not ours by evidence, not by hypotheses proven by experiments. They are ours by choice. We believe.

The choice is the most democratic one we may ever have. It is freely offered as a gift to every person who has, or does, or will ever live. It is a choice that allows us to experience inward and spiritual grace. It is also a choice that calls us to lives that produce outward signs, distinctive behaviors that will be noticed by those around us. It is a choice that sets us apart from the rest of the world, and yet urges us to invite the rest of the world to join us. It is a choice that calls us to make Easter, and a sense of the presence of Jesus Christ, alive not just for fifty days but every day. This is the choice each of us will carry with us as we leave this place today, the choice to live each day spreading the joy and vitality of this love of God to all people for all time. Alleluia!