

# Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

## Sermon

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Vanderbilt Presbyterian Church

1225 Piper Boulevard, Naples, FL 34110

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### **“After Easter, How Do We Go On Believing”**

John 20:19-31

With this final verse, vs. 31 of Chap. 20, the Gospel of John officially ends! What goes on in Chap. 21 is a sort of "P.S.", added later, either by the author, John, or, more probably, by a later editor. In the New Jerusalem Bible Version, the next Chapter, Chap. 21, is entitled, "The Epilogue". You see, John's testimony to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus has been given, even though he knows he has told only a fraction of what could be told; that is, about the words and actions of the Son of God. In fact, as I just read, John writes: "Many other signs Jesus did in the presence of the Disciples, which are not written in this book." He knew the stories reported in the other 3 Gospels, but chose not to include them, because Matthew, Mark and Luke had already told those stories, or those incidents. So, by the end of what we call Chap. 20, John had written enough for his purpose.

And what was John's purpose? Today we might say, "What was his 'bottom line'?" Was it to write a biography about Jesus, for anyone who might be interested? No! Was it to write a literary classic that would rank among the great books of all time? No! Rather, John tells us in these final words of Chap. 20, exactly what his purpose was: "These things (words and or stories) are written", he says, and here is his purpose, "these things are written, so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that in believing, you may have life in His Name.

Now, literary critics, when they review a book, have a favorite word with which to "slam" a book, particularly a biography. They call it, "tendentious". That means that the author wrote the biography to further a certain point of view. Well, my friends, each of the Gospels are unashamedly "tendentious". They unashamedly intend to further a very particular point of view, and that is, that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God, that He is the Lord and Savior of the world! You see, the Gospels are not simply records of a religious movement that flourished for a few years. Rather, they are the testimony of those who discovered who Jesus really is. And so they wrote, that others might make the same discovery! But, as we will see, they also wrote to strengthen the faith of the emerging, on-going communities of believers that were cropping up all over the then known world.... And so, it is the witness of these 4 Gospels, and that community we call "the Church", that has drawn us here this morning, the Sunday following the Easter celebration.

Now, the events in the relatively short campaign of the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus, could have been but "a flash in the pan." There were then, as there have been since, hundreds of so-called Messiahs, "saviors", religious figures, who made their impact, but were then forgotten, except as the subject for an occasional Ph.D. thesis. The early chapters of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles indicate that Jesus' Disciples feared that this might happen to their new-found Lord. But it didn't, as all of us attested to last week, when millions around the world, gathered in Churches, to celebrate His resurrection and there were probably more who did that this year, than ever before. And what was it that renewed the faith of the Disciples? What was it that persuaded others to accept Jesus as their Lord, and their God? And what was it that kept this belief alive, even when the excitement of that first Easter, had died away?

Well, the answers to these questions are well worth our knowing, since every one of us has had some experience, I'm sure, of the ebb and flow of our belief in Jesus. I mean, it is easy to believe, when we are untroubled by doubts, and/or the spring sunshine is in the air. It is easy to believe, when we are lifted up with a great congregation, on a surging tide of trumpets, organs and "alleluias"! But what about when the lights go out, or the color fades; when the Easter services are over; or when nagging questions return to nag our minds; and/or life in general goes sour? What about the spiritual and emotional reaction, known wistfully and vulgarly among the clergy, as "the post-Easter slump"? Most of us have had our high points of belief! But following the glory of Easter, what many want to know is: "How do we go on believing?" How do we sustain our enthusiasm? Well, this ending, in John's Gospel, gives us answers!

Yes, my friends, this passage from John was written for us! The author is not slamming the door on the story, and saying: "Well, that's that!" Rather, he is opening the door on the future, "that you may believe....that you may have life...!" And that 'you' is us, we who are reading what he has written. And John also offers us one of the Disciples as an example, as a 'patron saint', if Presbyterians had patron saints! And our example is Thomas, whose attitude is completely 21st century! Remember, he said: "Unless I see, I will not believe". Yes, this incident is included by John, in his Gospel, for those who cannot possibly see and touch the human body of Jesus; it is included for the scoffer at the Office who says, "Seeing is believing"; and it is included for the logical positivist in academia, who writes a fat book to tell the same thing! So, John gives us Thomas!

And he also gives us a new 'beatitude', which might well be the climax to those other beatitudes, given to us by Jesus Himself, that are so familiar. You remember them, "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, those who mourn...etc." In like manner, John writes Jesus saying, "Blessed are those who have not seen, and yet believe!"

Yes, we 'believe' when the Risen Christ comes close to us in the glory of the Easter celebration - and He brings us a sense of new life! But again, "after Easter, how do we go on believing?" - when our world closes in, and we are trapped in the routines of a secular society? How do we keep alive the inner flame of conviction, when there is so much around us that conspires to snuff it out? Well, in this passage, I find three brief directives, three pointers for the way ahead - let's take a quick look at them:

*First:* "These things are written..." writes John. In other words, we have the records, that is, the Bible! And though we do not worship the records, the Bible, we do worship the One to whom the Bible, the records, point. The story of Jesus is there, not to be placed on a shelf, with some other biographies we read once, and then never again. Rather, the words of the Bible have had an extraordinary life of their own, over the centuries. After the 'eyewitnesses' were all dead, the early Christians kept going back to the stories of Jesus that had been collected and written down by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. And they kept the letters of the Apostles, who reflected on that story. Then they bound them together with the story of "the people of God", who were the forerunners of the church, that is, the Jews! And then they would carry these messages to many parts of the world, in order to win new converts to the faith.

And so, "going on believing" after Easter, is not such a problem, if we decide to get to know this Book, discovering more and more about what it says to, and about, us! By reading this Book, the Bible, the records, we discover that it feeds us. It keeps our inner life alive, so that Jesus Christ becomes more and more a Presence, a Power, a day-by-day Director of our lives. Yes, "These things are written..." wrote John. The "on-going believer not only returns to the most familiar stories of the Gospel but finds an endless adventure in what Paul called, "the unsearchable riches

of Christ" that keep dawning on us, at each succeeding stage of life....I am tempted to say of the Bible what Anthony said about Cleopatra: "Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety." You see, wherever you find a really "on-going believer" or an "on-going church", you will find that both are nourished by a vital contact with this mysteriously enduring Book, The Bible! And so the first directive, the first "pointer" to help us answer: "After Easter, how do we go on believing?" is, that everything we need to know, is written! We have the records; we have this Bible! And to "go on believing" means we need to read this book - we need to immerse ourselves in it.

But *second*: another stimulus to our faith emerges clearly from this passage of John. Thomas, one of the 12 Disciples, did not remain alone with all his doubts. He may have been lying in his bed, a man with shattered hopes and ideals, nursing his dismal rejection of the resurrection story. But something made him get up, and slip through the dark streets, to re-join his old companions again. And it was when they were around him, that Jesus came to him. He was not alone; he sought out the company of others who followed Jesus.

You see, there is no record anywhere in the N.T. of a Christian "going on believing" by him/herself. They joined, or re-joined the other believers. In fact, the Greek word in our text is in the plural, "These are written that YOU (plural) might believe, and in believing, YOU (plural) may have life in His Name.

You see, from the beginning, believers formed a community. And it was within that community that each found strength to carry on, to 'go on believing.' In fact, the earliest group of believers declared that they believed not only in the Risen Lord to whom they had given their allegiance, but also in the one, holy catholic or universal church, that emerging community of believers throughout the world! But that great world church, for them, was always locally visible, in the form of a specific congregation of people with whom they worshiped and worked. It was found in Ephesus, and Corinth, and Rome. It was in Thessolonica, Galatia and Philippi where they experienced the surrounding care and love of other believers, which nourished them, and strengthened them, which gave them confidence to go on believing! As many of you have heard me say before, the term "individual Christian" is a contradiction in terms! To be a Christian automatically assumes being part of a fellowship of other believers. It is not an option; it is what being a Christian is!

You know, almost every member of a church, eventually learns sometime in his/her life, about what it means to have the backing of a local church family. Maybe it is during an illness, or a financial, or emotional, or spiritual crisis. Many times people have said: "I never realized how helpful the people of the church could be". But, to worship together, to study together, to share together our joys and sorrows, our laughter and our tears, our convictions and our uncertainties, these are the marks of a living, growing church, where we help one another to keep alive the vision we have in the moments of our most radiant conviction. And so, "after Easter, how do we go on believing?" Well first we have the records, the Bible! But we also have one another, a community of fellow-believers, that is, we have the church!

But *third*, and finally, this last half of the 20th chapter of John's Gospel has a curious statement about Jesus and His Disciples. It says: "And He (Jesus) breathed on them (the Disciples) and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'." What this says is: that to "keep on believing", we need not only the Bible nourishing us; we need not only the backing of a caring, Christian congregation; but we also need an inward, revitalizing power, that third force of the God-head we know as the Holy Spirit! And we do not need to wait for Pentecost, to be reminded of this power that Jesus communicated to His Disciples. Yes, "Jesus breathed on them." Did they re-member Jesus' words

to Nicodemus, about the Spirit being like the wind, which blows where it will, which cannot be seen, but which has such power? Yes, the Christian community has been breathed upon by the Spirit of God; and our lives, yours and mine, are subject to that same indwelling power. This is why strange and wonderful things can happen, to the Christian, and to the congregation, who can "go on believing."

And my friends, we need always to be ready for the mysterious movement of the Spirit. Sometimes the Spirit comes in unexpected ways, at unexpected times, and for unexpected reasons. But the Spirit also comes in what should be expected ways, and times, and reasons, as well. For instance, if we are paying attention, we should see the Spirit comes as we gather for worship; the Spirit comes when Baptism is administered to those "whom God calls to be His own"; the Spirit comes when the Bread is broken and the Cup shared; or when we read the Bible in an open and trusting manner, and our heart is "strangely warmed." Yes, the Spirit comes whenever we are together, as He promised to be present when two or three are gathered in His Name. So, to "go on believing" is to recognize that through His Spirit, Jesus Himself is among us; and we are united to Him anew, in life and in death.

My friends, after Easter, we can "go on believing", because we have these words from John, who wrote: "These things are written, that YOU (plural) may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing (as He breathes His confirming Spirit on us), YOU (plural) may have life in His Name!"

So Easter is over, but we CAN go on believing, because we have the Bible, we have the Church, and we have the Holy Spirit of God, all making Jesus present in our midst. We CAN go on believing, the question is, WILL WE? And if we do not decide to do that today, then WHEN?

AMEN!