

Sermons from St. Thomas

So I Send You

Second Sunday of Easter, 3 April, 2016: Acts 5:27-32, Psalm 118:14-29, Revelation 1:4-8, John 10:19-31.

Newcomers to St. Thomas often wonder about the words above our altar – *Dominus Meus et Deus Meus*. Most of us don't study Latin, so the words look like a secret message of some kind. But they are simply the Latin translation of the words of St. Thomas – My Lord and My God. They are his declaration of Easter faith. He came to them honestly, after wrestling with whether the resurrection could be true. But when he encountered the risen Christ on this day, the Sunday after Easter, he overflowed with this confession – My Lord and my God. I don't know who had the idea to put them there. Maybe it was Julie Barbaree's dad, the architect! They are inscribed above the altar because we trust that the risen Christ meets us here and invites us to forgiveness and peace. When we come to the altar, even if we don't say the words aloud, we share in Thomas' confession – My Lord and my God.

But other words preceded his words and made his words and his faith possible. Thomas's encounter with the risen Christ happened because the disciples did something Jesus told them to do. On Easter Day, Jesus surprised his friends by showing up in a locked room. They were so surprised he had to offer Peace twice. And he began that encounter by saying this – “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Thomas's confession of faith happened because the disciples followed this command.

On Easter Day, the Risen Christ gave the disciples a mission. Just as God sent Jesus to be God's incarnate presence in the world, just as God sent Jesus to bear witness to God's reign of love and abundance and justice, just as God sent Jesus to declare forgiveness and freedom, now Jesus sent the disciples to do the same thing.

And thanks be to God they did. Thomas was their first act of obedience. They went from Easter to find their confused and doubting friend and bring him to a faithful encounter with Jesus. Then Thomas and all the apostles continued to do what Jesus told them to do. They continued to be sent by the Holy Spirit all over the known world as ambassadors of God's saving work.

According to tradition, Peter went to Rome. Andrew went as far as Russia. John went to Ephesus, Matthew to Ethiopia, Thomas went to Syria and perhaps as far as India. And from that early beginning, from just a few dozen followers, the way of Jesus spread all over the world. According to a 2012 report from the Pew Institute, Christians represent the largest religious group in the world today. Almost a third of the world's inhabitants claim to be Christian. We are the majority religious group in North America, South America, Europe, Australia, sub-Saharan Africa, and northern Asia. And even in places where Christianity is not the majority, there is still

Christian presence in most of the world. There are actually more Christians in the Asia Pacific region than in all of North America, even though Christianity is not the majority religion there. There are 67 million Christians in China.

Clearly the first witnesses to the resurrection did what Jesus told them to do. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

A word we often give to this sending work is mission. We've used the word in different ways over the centuries. For a sad period in Christian history, Christian mission was tied to colonialism and oppression. Missionaries travelled with armies and used Christian faith to subjugate people. That's not what Jesus sent us to do. At other times, Christian mission was less coercive, but Christians still came to parts of the world with an attitude of "We're right. You're wrong. Do what we say." That's not what Jesus sent us to do.

Jesus said clearly, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." The way God sent Jesus is the foundation of Christian mission. God sent Jesus into the world to be God's presence with us, to proclaim and live out God's way of justice and abundance and good for all people. Jesus came in peace and understanding, emphasizing love for God and neighbor. Jesus declared that God's reign was already happening – it was growing like leaven in a loaf, like a seed planted in the ground. As the Father sent Jesus, so Jesus sent his followers – to be God's presence in this hurting world and nurture the places where God's reign of love is growing. That's what Jesus sent his followers to do.

And when you look at mission like that, it's not just about converting people to Christianity, convincing others we're right and they're wrong. Of course, those who love the way of Jesus want to invite everyone we know to follow it. But even if they say no, even if they continue to profess their own faith or no faith at all, Christian mission still seeks God's good for all people because that's what Jesus did.

The Anglican Communion defines mission this way. We call it the Five Marks of Mission. These are the tasks we try to do in mission together throughout the Anglican Communion all over the world.

- proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
- teach, baptize and nurture new believers
- respond to human need by loving service
- seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation
- strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Proclaiming the way of Jesus, baptizing new believers, caring for those in need, changing the systems and structures that cause harm, and caring for creation – all of this is mission. All of this is our response to the words of Jesus – So I send you.

And we recognize that mission does not start with us. It is not our idea. It starts with God. From the very beginning of creation, God has been on a mission to love and bless and redeem our world. It is God's mission, not ours. We simply have the privilege of sharing in it. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

So during Easter season, for the next several Sundays, we will reflect on mission in many forms, many ways we in the Episcopal Church, the Diocese of Atlanta, and St. Thomas engage in mission.

Next Sunday, Bishop Wimberly will be with us. He will offer Confirmation at the 10:30 service, giving folks who are new to the Episcopal Church the opportunity to declare their commitment to our baptismal covenant. After the service, he will dedicate the remodeled youth hut. Pray for good weather. And during adult forum, he will talk about something our bishops did recently as a response to God's mission in the world. They issued a statement about the need for civil discourse in politics. That is part of pursuing peace and reconciliation in our world. It is an act of mission.

On Saturday April 16, our diocese is offering a mission event at St. Luke's, in part to honor the missionary work of Martin and Sandy McCann. I do hope St. Thomas folks will attend. Flyers are in the narthex. Charlie Roper, a former rector of St. Thomas, hopes to be there. This is an opportunity to learn more about mission in the Episcopal Church, how we work together to change the world. That Sunday, April 17, David Copley, the mission personnel officer for the Episcopal Church, will be here to talk about opportunities for global mission service in our church. He'll meet with adults at 9:30 and with youth during coffee hour.

On April 24, Deacon Lesley-Ann Drake will be with us. She is founder of Path to Shine, a diocesan wide mentoring ministry that we offer at Boxwood. She will talk about how she was led to start this ministry and also her work as a deacon. Deacons have a specific ministry to engage the church in mission so we will hear from her.

And on May 1, Meg Olive, a new member of St. Thomas, will talk about her work with Circles in Columbus and how that is part of mission here in Columbus.

All of these people, all of these ministries, are faithful responses to the words of Jesus we hear this day – As the Father has sent me, so I send you.

But I remind that Jesus did not say, "So I send them." He said, "So I send you." You. Me. We are called by Jesus to go into our world to bear witness to God's reign of love and to share in what God is doing to reconcile and heal all things.

So imagine more words in our church – these words of Jesus above the exit as you leave. As the Father has sent me, so I send you. Where is the Risen Jesus sending you this week?

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