

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Second Sunday of Easter, April 7, 2024.

Our lessons today are special because they assure you and me that despite our shortcomings God has our back. He is there for us, no matter what. Is there a better feeling than to know that someone has our back? I don't think so.

Why is this feeling so special? Because we often find ourselves in difficulty, either self-made difficulty or difficulty caused by others or conditions. Either way, God is available to help. Indeed, in many cases when we feel trapped, God has already acted on our behalf. We simply haven't recognized it or accepted it.

Well, what we do in this setting is to "recognize and accept" God's help. That help, that under-pinning, that assurance, is what we proclaim in this setting. There is a God – capital G - and this God **has our back**.

Now, sometimes we wonder whether that is true. Sometimes we feel alone, maybe even betrayed. When things go wrong for us, we either doubt that there is a God, or we question whether God's response is what we need or want. And when we are in doubt, maybe even angry, we look for assurance.

And guess what, we get that assurance in Scripture, and we get that assurance in a thoughtful, generous community like this one.

Look at today's lesson from The Acts of the Apostles. "There was not a needy person among them distributed to each as any had need." This was the early Church. And it is what you and experience right here. Your thoughtfulness for one another is impressive. Such level of thoughtfulness has deep roots, which require nourishment, both the nourishment of one another and the nourishment of the Lord. We have one another's back in part because the Lord **has our back**.

In today's Gospel, we are reminded that there are consequences to not having one's back. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven but if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." In other words, you and I make a difference in the quality of life for ourselves and others. Having one's back, as we do in this setting, makes a difference. Just as God intended and intends.

Our second reading today – the First Letter of John, not the Gospel of John – probably different authors – reminds us “that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.” Note that the “in him” refers to God, not you and me. God as perfect light. Light with a capital L, if you will.

But God is not the only one who qualifies here. You and I have our share of that Light. Clearly not at the level of the Creator, but we are blessed with the ability to make the lives of others better. And when we do so, we are at our happiest. And presumably, we are making others happier as well.

This community is an example of positive sharing and positive outcomes. In the language of today’s Collect, “We show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith.” We have the back of the Lord, and we, in gratitude and obedience, have the backs of others.

And it makes an enormous difference. Can we even picture a society where people don’t have the backs of others? Where selfishness reigns? No, you and I can’t picture that condition. And part of the reason for our focus on helping others is because we have the blessing of others having helped us.

Now it is our turn. And, knowing this community, as a rookie compared to most of you, I would say that individually and collectively “having one’s back” is a guiding principle for you all. We feel support from one another, and we feel very good when we can return the favor.

Again, can we even imagine a life where people don’t have one another’s back? Well, if truth be told, yes, we can imagine a life where people don’t have one another’s back. And it’s never a pleasant picture. Our political system, for example, for all its strengths, can lose sight of the importance of “having one’s back.” A subject for another time perhaps.

The reality is that “having one’s back” is not automatic. We need reminders that the principle of “having one’s back” is not our invention. It is God’s invention and intention. And when we lose sight of what God intends, we lose sight of what we intend for one another. That’s why it is in our interest to keep God’s intention front and center.

That's our role right here for this community. Lift up the Lord. Share the Lord. Offer the Lord. Model keeping the back of those in need. What today's Collect calls "the new covenant of reconciliation."

Our final hymn today – "The strife is o'er" – reinforces our role. Look at these phrases: "the song of triumph has begun," and "let hymns of praise his triumphs tell!" In other words, there is work to do, and **we are the workers**. And the work we do is to assure our neighbors that we have their backs, just as the Risen Christ has our backs. Knowing that, feeling that, sensing that, receiving that, is our job.

It is our contribution to all the different communities and settings of which we are a part. This is our way of "having one's back." This is what we are to our nation and the world. We contribute in many ways, but none are as important as "I have/we have/the Lord has your back."

It is with this assurance that we, as individuals and as a nation, can be at our best. It's a pretty special assignment because it comes from the Lord himself. Not "back sliding," but "back proclaiming."

Thank you, Jesus, for trusting us to share this very special Love!

Amen.

Service of Holy Communion
Second Sunday of Easter – April 7, 2024

Hymn 174 – At the Lamb’s high feast we sing

At the Lamb’s high feast we sing praise to our victorious King,
who hath washed us in the tide flowing from his pierced side;
praise we him, whose love divine gives his sacred Blood for wine,
gives his Body for the feast, Christ the victim, Christ the priest.

Where the Paschal blood is poured, death’s dark angel sheathes his sword;
Israel’s hosts triumphant go through the wave that drowns the foe.
Praise we Christ, whose blood was shed, Paschal victim, Paschal bread;
with sincerity and love eat we manner from above.

Mighty victim from on high, hell’s fierce powers beneath thee lie,
thou hast conquered in the fight, thou hast brought us life and light:
now no more can death appall, now no more the grave enthrall;
thou hast opened paradise, and in thee thy saints shall rise.

Easter triumph, Easter joy, these alone do sin destroy,
From sin’s power do thou set free soul’s newborn, O Lord, in thee.
Hymns of glory, songs of praise, Father, unto thee we raise:
risen Lord, all praise to thee with the Spirit ever be.

Page 355

Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins..
His mercy endures for ever.

Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy Name; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Page 356 - Song of Praise

*Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.
Lord God, heavenly King, almighty God and Father,
we worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, only Son of the Father, Lord God, Lamb of God,
you take away the sin of the world: have mercy on us;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father: receive our prayer.
For you alone are the Holy One, you alone are the Lord, you alone are the Most
High, Jesus Christ, with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the father. Amen.*

The Lord be with you.
And also with you.
Let us pray.

Collect for Second Sunday of Easter

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading – Acts 4:32-35

Psalm 133

Oh, how good and pleasant it is;
when brethren live together in unity!
It is like fine oil upon the head
that runs down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron,
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
It is like the dew of Hermon
that falls upon the hills of Zion.
For there the Lord has ordained the blessing:
life for evermore.

Second Reading – I John 1:1-2:2

Hymn 488 – Be thou my vision

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
all else be nought to me, save that thou art.
thou my best thought, by day or by night,
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, and thou my true word;
I ever with thee and though with me, Lord;
thou my great Father; thine own may I be;
thou in my dwelling, and I one with thee.

High King of heaven, when victory is won,
may I reach heaven's joys, and bright heaven's Sun!
Heart of my heart, whatever befall,
still be my vision, O Ruler of all.

Gospel – John 20:19-31

Sermon

The Rev. Charles Rowins

Nicene Creed – page 358

*We believe in one God,
the Father, the almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.*

*Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.*

*On the third day he rose again In accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father,
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.*

Prayers of the People Form IV – page 388

Let us pray for the Church and for the world.

Grant, Almighty God, that all who confess your Name may be united in your truth, live together in your love, and reveal your glory in the world.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Guide the people of this land, and of all the nations, in the ways of justice and peace; that we may honor one another and serve the common good.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Give us all a reverence for the earth as your own creation, that we may use its resources rightly in the service of others and to your honor and glory.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Bless all whose lives are closely linked with ours, and grant that we may serve Christ in them, and love one another as he loves us.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Comfort and heal all those who suffer in body, mind, or spirit; give them courage and hope in their troubles, and bring them the joy of your salvation.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

We commend to your mercy all who have died, that your will for them may be fulfilled; and we pray that we may share with all your saints in your eternal kingdom.

Lord, in your mercy. *Hear our prayer.*

Confession and Absolution – page 360

Let us confess our sins against God and our neighbor.

*Most merciful God,
we confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done,
and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

Almighty God have mercy on you, forgive you all your sins through our Lord Jesus Christ, strengthen you in all goodness, and by the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in eternal life. Amen.

The Peace – page 360

The Peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

Announcements and Preparation of the Table

Eucharistic Prayer – page 361

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore we praise, you, joining our voices with Angels and Archangels and with all the company of heaven, who for ever sing this hymn to proclaim the glory of your Name:

*Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.*

Hosanna in the highest.

Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest.

Holy and gracious Father: In your infinite love you made us for yourself; and, when we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death, you, in your mercy, sent Jesus Christ, your only and eternal Son, to share our human nature, to live and die as one of us, to reconcile us to you, the God and Father of all.

He stretched out his arms upon the cross, and offered himself, in obedience to your will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world.

On the night he was handed over to suffering and death, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread; and when he had given thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and said, "Take, eat: this is my Body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me."

After supper he took the cup of wine; and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, and said, "Drink this, all of you: this is my Blood of the new Covenant,

which is shed for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this for the remembrance of me.”

Therefore we proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again.

We celebrate the memorial of our redemption, O Father, in this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving. Recalling his death, resurrection, and ascension, we offer you these gifts.

Sanctify them by your Holy Spirit to be for your people the Body and Blood of your Son, the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. Sanctify us also that we may faithfully receive this holy Sacrament, and serve you in unity, constancy, and peace; and at the last day bring us with all your saints into the joy of your eternal kingdom.

All this we ask through your Son Jesus Christ. By him, and with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit all honor and glory is yours, Almighty Father, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Lord's Prayer

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, we are bold to say,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name,

thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Breaking of the Bread

Alleluia. Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us.

Therefore let us keep the feast. Alleluia.

The Gifts of God for the People of God. Take them in remembrance that Christ died for you, and feed on him in your hearts by faith, with thanksgiving.

Communion

Post Communion Prayer – BCP page 365

*Eternal God, heavenly Father, **you** have graciously accepted us as living members of your Son our Savior Jesus Christ, and you have fed us with spiritual food in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. Send us now into the world in peace, and grant us strength and courage to love and serve you with gladness and singleness of heart; through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Hymn 208 – The strife is o'er

The strife is o'er, the battle done,
the victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!

The powers of death have done their worst,
but Christ their legions hath dispersed;
Let shout of holy joy outburst. Alleluia!

The three sad days are quickly sped,
he rises glorious from the dead:
All glory to our risen Head! Alleluia!

He closed the yawning gates of hell,
the bars from heaven's high portals fell;
Let hymns of praise his triumphs tell! Alleluia!

Lord! by the stripes which wounded thee,
from death's dread sting thy servants free,
that we may live and sing to thee. Alleluia!

Dismissal

Alleluia! Alleluia! Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Alleluia!

Lessons for Easter 2 – April 7, 2024

Collect: Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Acts 4:32-35

Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Psalm 133

Oh, how good and pleasant it is,
 when brethren live together in unity!
It is like fine oil upon the head
 that runs down upon the beard,
Upon the beard of Aaron,
 and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
It is like the dew of Hermon
 that falls upon the hills of Zion.
For there the Lord has ordained the blessing:
 life for evermore.

Second Reading: 1 John 1:1-2:2

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us – we declare to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are living in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: John 20:19-31

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “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.” But Thomas (who was called the Twin) one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.” Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.” Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*