

The Rev. Patricia Rose
Second Sunday of Easter
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
April 27, 2025

Some of you may know that today, the Sunday after Easter, is often called “Low Sunday.”

The origin of this name is unclear, but one thing associated with it is lower attendance than Easter. True for St. Paul's! We had 715 people celebrating last Sunday. 108 more than last year. A jubilant celebration!

One article about Low Sunday mused that: “The people who come to worship the Sunday after Easter are typically the most stalwart, dedicated churchgoers.” Well alright! Here you are!

And lucky for us, another tradition associated with Low Sunday is that it can be, as British writer Seb Reily put it, “a day of reflection and calm after the festivities and excess of Easter.” This is a real treasure because reflection and calm are essential to our well-being – spiritually, emotionally, mentally, physically, even socially. But we don't often take the time for these things. Not regularly taking time for reflection and calm is like not tending to the garden of our soul.

One of the things that keep us from taking the time is getting caught up in cultural trends that we've become accustomed to. Our culture considers it normal to spend hours a day staring at screens. It can be necessary for work, practical for other things, or entertaining. But it also can be time spent hypnotizing our consciousness and our mind with messages that are often toxic, shallow, negative, and anxiety producing. It also disrupts our calm because it's usually done in deadening isolation, which increases anxiety. We may feel some of our time on screen is socializing, but it's not the same. It's like hugging yourself. It's not like eye contact and the live connection that we need.

In addition to being consumed by screens, we are as a culture, insanely busy, even frantic. This is not natural, not healthy. Along with isolation, this contributes to the rising pandemic of anxiety, a poverty of calm.

I once interviewed poet Billy Collins. He was the US Poet Laureate at the time and had to travel a lot for speaking engagements. I asked him what was the hardest thing about being on the road so much, and he said, “I don't have a chance to be bored. To go out in the yard and kick a pinecone around or look at the sky. And those times are when many of my poems come.”

We were talking on the phone and got interrupted by a knock on his hotel room door. When he came back, he said, somewhat sheepishly, “Hotel management dropped off a big basket of fruit and champagne, and here I am whining about the hardship of travel.” But he stuck by his answer. Even

more than lavish gifts and the perks of fame, what he treasured most was the space for reflection and calm where the depths of creativity arise.

We need times like that, space for reflection or just being, kicking a pinecone or being receptive to God with us as a felt experience, not an idea. Time to hear from not only from our creative depths, but the depths of our heart, our soul, our deepest connection with Truth.

So stalwart, dedicated churchgoers of Low Sunday, I'd like to offer us two opportunities for reflection, first about our own experiences and second about a theme of today's gospel - believing.

First, I invite us to reflect on our experiences of Lent, Holy Week, the powerful services of Holy Week. Maybe you felt your heart lifted by a hymn, a prayer, or in affection or gratitude for another person. Maybe you felt times of intimacy with God, or calm, or an insight. Or felt some grief or sadness, tears that needed to be shed, or comfort. Maybe it was a moment of jubilation, joy. By calling an experience to mind you may feel more rooted personally in this sermon.

By reflecting on our sacred experiences, we can integrate them, re-live the power of them, be nourished by them today, or this week, or sometimes for the rest of our lives. And out of these reflections, gratitude can arise. Gratitude as not simply a thought, but a life-giving energy that lightens our being, calms us, aligns us with the holy.

In the garden of our soul, reflecting on our sacred experiences is like spreading rich compost on the soil from which we grow, the very soil from which we are striving to live and love well. To NOT take time to reflect on our experiences is like receiving gifts, but never using them, never giving thanks for them.

Low Sunday is also sometimes called "Doubting Thomas" Sunday, because this is always the gospel. The story is only in John's gospel, which has a strong focus on believing. The word "believe" appears in John's gospel 98 times, compared to only 35 in all the other gospels combined.

So let's reflect on "believing" for a few moments. The Greek word for believe – *pisteuo* - meant something more than just to have mental agreement with a concept or idea, like it typically means in English. The Greek word meant to be faithful to, committed, or dedicated to.

British author, Karen Armstrong writes on world religions, and her 400-page book "A Case for God" covers the entire history of religion in humanity from its earliest known appearances 32,000 years ago to the present.

She writes that for most of that 32,000 year history - up to around the 16th century, the Scientific Revolution - religion was not something humans thought, or "believed in" but something they *did*.

She says "There are some things that can be learned only by constant, dedicated practice" and in that way, "you find you can achieve something that initially seemed impossible."

In the area of religion she says that the practice involves a knack for *ekstasis* -meaning to step outside who we think we are, and thereby “experience the sacred.”

“People who acquired this knack discovered a transcendent dimension of life that was not simply an external reality ‘out there,’ ” - to believe in - but “was identical with the deepest level of their being.”

People “*discovered a transcendent dimension of life that was not ‘out there,’ but was identical with the deepest level of their being*”

This precisely describes surrendering to Christ. Not believing in some concept, but imitating Christ, being faithful and committed to Christ’s way of life. I’ve heard it said that Jesus was not trying to teach people new ideas but to effect a change in consciousness.

Richard Rohr, an American Franciscan priest said, “Rather than making dogmatic statements about how to get to heaven, Jesus modeled and taught *how to live on earth* in a loving way, and Jesus said that this was indeed heaven!”

So that’s my reflection on believing.

Before we close with a prayer, I’d like to mention one more thing that I’ve read about Low Sunday. Some churches have instituted taking the day for some “Holy Humor”, a time to lighten up. Doing silly things like wearing masks to church or having, as part of the sermon, people stand up and tell a joke.

So I’d like to invite you all to . . .No, I’m just kidding!

I wouldn’t go that far. But I do believe lightness and humor is a perfect companion for cultivating reflection and calm. The poems of Billy Collins, who I spoke of, are often humorous, with a twist of subtle wisdom thrown in. So I’d like to share one of his poems. I’ll let you figure out what the wisdom is.

The Embrace

You know the parlor trick.
wrap your arms around your own body
and from the back it looks like
someone is embracing you
her hands grasping your shirt
her fingernails teasing your neck
from the front it is another story
you never looked so alone
your crossed elbows and screwy grin

you could be waiting for a tailor
to fit you with a straight jacket
one that would hold you really tight.

May our reflections on our experiences of this holy season help lead us to true believing, lightness of being and laughter, faithfulness to the way of Christ and to the deepest level of our being in Christ. And from that place, may we pour out love on ourselves, one another, and on this hurting and frightened world. Alleluia!