

Second Sunday of Easter
April 28, 2019
John 20:19-31, Psalm 150, Acts 5:27-32
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Today is the second Sunday of Easter. That means that Easter was last Sunday, April 21st. Anyone here know when Easter will be next year? April 12th. And the year after that. April 4th. And in 2022, Easter will be on April 17th. For those of you who remember these things, Easter is decided by the vernal equinox, the first day of Spring, which is March 21st. Easter is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. See how easy that was? But that means you have to be an astronomer or a calendar nerd to know when Easter is for the next few years. It also means that Easter can be as early as March 22nd or as late as April 25th. For those who get excited about things like this, Easter will fall as late as possible, on April 25th in 2038. I think we should have a special party for that one, what do you think. And it will fall early, on March 22nd in 2285. I'm not waiting around for that one.

But it hasn't always been this way. In the very early church, Easter was often celebrated around the Jewish festival of Passover. You'll remember that when Jesus gathers with his disciples in the upper room to share the Last Supper with them, it is the Passover meal that they share. So for the early Christian church, they would celebrate Easter a few days after Passover. The feast of Passover is always on the 14th day of the Jewish month of Nisan. But as many of you know, the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar, not a solar one, and so it would not only change from year to year, but it would mean that Easter was not always on a Sunday, but would just be three days after the Passover, whatever day of the week that happened to be. After a while, the two feasts began to be celebrated separately and some of the Christian Church began to celebrate Easter on a Sunday every year. But there was great debate over how it should be decided which day was Easter. Some churches celebrated Easter one way and others would celebrate it according to another way of calculating. That caused problems because in one town or principality some people would be feasting and celebrating while another was still fasting during Lent. In England this got to be a particular problem. And so in the year 664 there was

called a meeting by Oswy, the King of Northumbria to make a decision between the two ways. One group of Christians was following one way of dating Easter and another was following a second. But the issue was actually over more than that. This meeting, called the Synod of Whitby, was essentially a conflict between two spiritual perspectives or ways of seeing. One way was the traditional Celtic way, which saw themselves as inspired by the apostle John, remembering him as the beloved disciple who leaned against Jesus at the Last Supper. He had become an image of the practice of listening for the heartbeat of God. This spirituality lent itself to listening for God at the heart of life. The other way of looking at things was the Roman way, and they saw themselves as inspired by Peter as the rock on which Christ had promised to build his Church. He had become the symbol of faithful action and outward unity. This spirituality favored a listening for God in the ordained teaching and life of the Church. Each church, the Roman and the Celtic had a way of calculating when Easter was. They also had each their own form of tonsure, the haircut of the monks. The Roman tonsure was to shave the crown of the head and leave the hair around the sides. The Celtic way was to shave the sides and leave the crown to grow long. These may seem like silly things about which to argue, but they are symbolic of different ways of looking at the world. The real conflict was over the vision of God and how God was seen in the world. The Roman spirituality saw God as separate from God's creation. God had created the world out of nothing and although creation was good in the beginning, it was now infected with sin because of the sinfulness of humanity. The Roman way of looking at things prompt the belief in original sin, that we are all born sinful, and that we look at the physical world as something to be overcome and eventually we escape from as our spirits are set free at death and we go to a spiritual heaven to be with God, whom we know to be spirit.

The Celtic way of looking at the world is a bit different. And they would start with the stories of the resurrection like we read today. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he was raised as a body, he wasn't a disembodied spirit. Thomas and the other disciples were able to touch him. They put their fingers in the holes in his hands and touch the wound in his side. The Celtic view, supported by John

they would say, is that the body is a good thing. Jesus' resurrected body is not the same kind of body as ours is, but he's not a ghost either. The Celtic view is that in the beginning, God did not create out of nothing, but created out of God's self. The most typical mark for the spirituality of the Celtic tradition is in the writing of a monk by the name of Pelagius who lived in Britain in the 400s. I have to admit that I resonate with much of Pelagius' thought and you may criticize me for that. Pelagius himself was eventually condemned as a heretic. I tend to think that we could use some more of his heresy. Pelagius believed in the essential goodness of creation, in which the life of God can be glimpsed. Everywhere, he says "narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven from earth."¹

To a friend he wrote:

Look at the animals roaming the forest: God's spirit dwells within them. Look at the birds flying across the sky: God's spirit dwells within them. Look at the tiny insects crawling in the grass: God's spirit dwells within them. Look at the fish in the river and sea: God's spirit dwells within them. There is no creature on earth in whom God is absent . . . when God pronounced that his creation was good, it was not only that his hand had fashioned every creature; it was that his breath had brought every creature to life. Look too at the great trees of the forest; look at the wild flowers and the grass in the fields; look even at your crops. God's spirit is present within all plants as well. The presence of God's spirit in all living things is what makes them beautiful.

But at the Synod of Whitby in 664 AD, the king decided that the church should be united in following the Roman way. And so the Celtic way began to fade away. And not just the way the Celts had of calculating Easter, but their way of looking at the world and looking and listening for God in the world. Lots of you know that although I appreciate much of the Roman way of looking at the life of the spirit, there is much we have lost in not having the Celtic way of seeing the world, as a place not just that has been made by God, but is infused with God's Spirit.

We are focusing today in many ways on caring for God's creation. But if the Celtic way of thought is at all correct, then we care for the world because we see the presence of God everywhere around us. And we care for each other, because there is none of us in whom the Spirit of God is not present. We can even see God in each other.

¹ Van de Weyer, Robert (ed.) *The Letters of Pelagius*. p. 58