

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert L. Hart, Easter 2, April 19, 2009, Acts 4: 32-35, Psalm 133, I John 1-2:2, John 20: 19-31

+In the Name of God who is life and light and with whom we have fellowship through Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.

It would be interesting to be alive at the beginning of something important, like when James Naismith invented the game of basketball. Beginnings are important. Naismith had to get it right. Did he cut out the bottom of those peach baskets he nailed up before or after the first lay up?

Actually what Naismith did in the beginning was considerably more formative than that. He got the right combination of factors that make for a great sport. Naismith had an intuitive feel for a team sport that would catch the competitive imagination and challenge people athletically and in terms of teamwork.

There was inspiration and genius at the beginning. Then the game of basketball took off. The game is a living thing. Basketball evolves and changes and remains essentially true to its beginnings. The sport remains true to itself as it is shaped by the experiences of the players, coaches and fans.

The Civil Rights movement in our country has a beginning. One can't say exactly who, when or what began it. But for the twentieth century we look to the Montgomery bus boycott and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as the beginning. We can rightly say that it began there because nothing so shaped events after it as that one event and that one man. Fortunately I was around for that beginning.

As I said, beginnings are crucial and so is the leader who brings it all together and launches the movement. In basketball it may not be so important to reference James Naismith but in the world of ideas and social movements the beginning and founder become inseparable. We will never separate the Civil Rights Movement from the words, the presence and the courage of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

In the decades after his death we study his words. We write the history of the movement through his actions. We could say about Dr. King and the Civil Rights Movement what John said about Jesus, "These things are written so that you may come to believe..."

All good things struggle to stay true to their beginnings, the original vision and inspiration. Basketball is essentially what it was when Naismith nailed up the first basket. The Civil Rights movement is working towards the same goals with the same methods it had sixty years ago. Yet, basketball and the Civil Rights movement have evolved and changed and grown in unexpected ways. History is a living experience of beginnings, change and growth. Always we are shaped by the challenges in front of us.

Christianity is no different. The Christian community has a beginning and a founder. And we have an immensely long history of trying to stay true to our origins as we live in a vastly different time and place.

We can see this in today's scripture readings. The Gospel of John and the First Letter of John were written several generations after the death and resurrection of Jesus. You can hear the concern for staying true to the beginnings. "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 writer keeps underscoring what has been seen, heard, even touched. The first followers are dying off. The way forward for the Church doesn't look to be an easy walk. And the writer urgently wants this rising generation of believers to have confidence in their faith and witness.

The Gospel story of the Risen Jesus appearing to the disciples and most of all to Thomas has the same message. In the beginning we could see and touch the Risen Lord. We want you, in these rising generations, to know that what we experienced at the beginning with Jesus is true. "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." So John writes it down, the story of the beginning and of Jesus, because the movement has a life of its own. And as it moves through history and changes and evolves it must have confidence it is staying true to the source of its life and mission.

This Christian community, Christ Church, Detroit, knows its beginnings. We are grounded in our founder and living Lord, Jesus Christ. We have moved through 164 years of the history of Detroit and we have been challenged as we changed and evolved in our witness. But not unlike the Christians addressed by both the Letter and Gospel of John we have to rediscover our confidence that what our forebears built and witnessed to, we can do too. We are heirs of a mission to bring light and life to an often dark and troubled world. We are beacons of hope and, yes, I believe we have all the resources to do God's work.

I've said so often from this pulpit that this region and this city needs witnesses to a just and sustainable human community. John witnessed so that future generations might have "life in his [Christ's] name." And we who are true to our beginnings know the life spoken of is an abundant life, an outpouring of God's life. Life, God's life, in its fullness has to be planted, and grown again right here in this soil.

There are people who are here this morning because Christ Church, decades ago witnessed to life and light. The parish built a gym and said to the kids in this neighborhood, "Come play basketball." And there are people here this morning who are here because Christ Church shed the prejudices of the past and said all are welcome in God's house. People have found God here, and they've found, in Christ's name, the abundance of God's life. They've found it here because we seek to be true to our beginnings and true to the mission of our founder and Risen Lord. For we are Christ Church Detroit.