



**LIVING WORD
EPISCOPAL CHURCH**

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

A Sermon for the Feast of St. Philip and St. James

St. John 14:1-9

Fr. William Klock

May 1, 2022

Today the Church remembers the Apostles Philip and James. As she was planning our song and hymn selection for today, Kathy asked what I'd be preaching on, would I continue with Revelation or would it be the lessons for Saints Philip and James? I said it would be Saints Philip and James, because in all my years preaching, I haven't had the chance. May 1st has fallen on Sunday several times, but the feast day has always been bumped to a weekday by the First Sunday after Easter or by Rogation Sunday, which both take precedence. And the more I've pondered the day's lessons, the more it occurs to me that it really is providential that this is the year these two saints finally get their due on a Sunday. Let me explain.

First, Philip and James. Who were these men who get such short shrift in the calendar? Well, both were amongst the Twelve, both were apostles. That's really all we know for certain. We know pretty much nothing about them. It doesn't help that they've often been confused with other Philips and Jameses. Unlike today, when everyone wants to give their children unique names, Jews, like everyone else in the First Century and down through history until today, were deliberately unimaginative. They valued naming their sons and daughters after parents and grandparents and heroes and heroines of the Scriptures. But that also means there weren't a lot of names in use. There were lots of Philips and Jameses, Johns and Josephs, a lot of Marys, and even Jesuses. There are

several Philips and several Jameses in the New Testament and it's not always easy sorting out which is which and even if some of them are the same or different people.

There was a Philip in the book of Acts who became the Church's first deacon, probably the same man who met and baptised the Ethiopian eunuch on the road to Gaza. But that's a different man. Philip the Apostle, our Philip here, is mentioned by Mathew, Mark, and Luke only as a member of the Twelve. John mentions him a few times. He tells us that Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus, another of the Twelve. In John 6 (our Gospel for the Fourth Sunday in Lent, you might remember), where a great (and hungry!) crowd had gathered to listen to Jesus, Jesus turned to Philip and asked where he thought they might buy bread to feed the crowd. Philip had no idea. "Jesus, two hundred times a day's wage wouldn't buy bread for all these people," he protested. At another point John tells us that Philip brought a group of Greek-speakers to Jesus. He was probably their translator. Then there's John 14, which we'll get to shortly. This selection for the Gospel goes back to the ancient church—one of this handful of passages where Philip has any role at all and one that fits with the themes of Eastertide, since that's usually when this feast day falls. Tradition—which may or may not be reliable and may have the two Philips confused—says that he travelled to Phrygia as a missionary where he was either crucified upside-down or beheaded.

And James. There are several Jameses in the New Testament, too. There's James the son of Zebedee, the brother of John. He's often called "James the Greater". We know a fair bit about him, because he was part of Jesus' inner circle: Peter, James, and John. And then, in Acts, we meet James the brother of Jesus. He was one of those to whom the risen Jesus appeared. That made a believer of him. He ended up becoming the leader, or

bishop if you will, of the Jerusalem Church. He's likely the author of the Epistle of James. We know quite a bit about him. But neither of those men is the James we remember today. Today we remember James the son of Alphaeus. Sometimes he's called "James the Lesser"—although even there, that may be yet another, fourth James. Of James, we know nothing but his name and the name of his father, Alphaeus, at least so far as the Bible goes. Tradition says that he was stoned while preaching outside the temple in Jerusalem, but again, tradition often had our James confused with James the brother of Jesus, who is said to have died the same way.

Even the origin of their feast day is kind of an accident. James and Philip are never paired together in the Gospels. It's always Philip and Bartholomew who are paired together. But in the 6th Century the Basilica of the Holy Apostles was dedicated in Rome and the relics of James and Philip placed there—on May 1st—and ever since then they've been linked together in the Calendar of the Western Church. Both men laboured for the Gospel in obscurity. They were Apostles, and yet all we really know of them is their names. And because their names were so common, they've often been confused with other men down through the ages. Even their commemoration on the calendar is an accident of history. And yet we have no reason to doubt their faithfulness to Jesus, to the Church, and to the gospel. When I think of them I can't help thinking of that famous line of Nicolaus von Zinendorf, one of the Seventeenth Century bishops of the Moravian Church. He wrote, "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten." How's that for some perspective? Again, "Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten."

And I think it's some perspective we need today. Last week I sat with a brother pastor from another faithful, local church that has been decimated by current trends and events. First it was sheep-stealing by other churches,

drawing people away, not by the gospel, but by gimmicks and excitement. Then the pandemic hit and some people just sort of evaporated. They just never came back and disappeared from the radar. And just when everyone thought we were through that, churches were hit with pandemic politics raised by some to the level of gospel. And it blew things apart. More people gone. And it's not just my friend. It's happening everywhere. We've been fortunate that none of these things has hit us as badly as they've hit a lot of other churches, but it's a real source of discouragement for pastors and others who have been seriously drained these last couple of years.

Rob and I met this week and had a similar conversation. So-and-so gone. And So-and-so gone. If only *that* family would come back. If only such-and-such sort of people would come. And I had to check myself. Church growth is good, but not if it comes with a loss to another gospel-preaching church. Yes, there are times when receiving believers from another church that's gone off the rails is a legitimate rescue operation, but generally speaking, that's not growing the church; it's just playing musical chairs. Church growth is what happens when you preach the gospel and people it hear it, believe, are baptised, and become disciples. But it's easy to forget this, because today everything everywhere is about numbers. We've turned the gospel into a business and the church into a product to be marketed. Brothers and Sisters, it's not about numbers and the gospel is not a commodity. We are not salesman. We are preachers. But Christians today have become obsessed with numbers. We've been influenced by the consumerist culture that surrounds us. And so no one wants to preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten. Everyone wants to make a name for themselves—a name they make by using the gospel as a ladder—as if we can make ourselves known to the world and to posterity as

we stand on the shoulders of Jesus. No one wants to be a Philip or a James, lifting high the cross and proclaiming the gospel no matter the cost, no matter how small their following—even as it leads to martyrdom. Because they knew that it wasn't about them; it was all about Jesus. Because their hope was not in this age, but in the age to come—the age they saw inaugurated in the risen, resurrected Jesus. They had had a glimpse of God's new creation. They put their faith in him, their lives and their futures in his hands, and they became faithful stewards of his gospel and his sheep.

Our Gospel today begins with Jesus saying, "Let not your hearts be troubled." This is in the middle of what's often called his Upper Room Discourse. Jesus has washed his friends' feet and they've shared that last Passover supper together, then Jesus tells them what's to come: betrayal by Judas and denial by Peter. He tells them, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." And he promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit who will make that possible. He'll speak of the opposition and hatred they will face on his account, but he'll also give them those assuring words, "Take heart, I have overcome the world." And this is where he announces that very soon he will be leaving them. None of this was easy for them to hear. But first, here, he says these words to them. Look at John 14:1-6.

"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. And you know the way to where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the

way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

"Fear not!" he says to them. "Trust in God—and trust in me, too." Their trust in God was a given, but in light of the events that would happen soon, it's natural for Jesus to urge them to trust him too. He's the Messiah—the one sent by God. He knows that they've struggled to understand just what that means. Most people had a messed up idea of who the Messiah would be and what he would do—and even the disciples hadn't sorted it out yet. Things were about to happen that would cause them to question whether Jesus was the Messiah. He was crucified as a false Messiah, after all. But Jesus urges them to trust him, just as he knows they've always trusted God. Dying and being absent from them for a time is part of his messianic ministry.

And in verse 2 he says those words that are always so popular at funerals. "In my Father's house are many rooms." These words are a source of comfort, but because we've lost the context in which Jesus spoke them, we tend misunderstand just what he's getting at. We tend to think of him going to prepare a place in heaven where the faithful dead escape the world and go to live in God's presence. The living in God's presence part of that is right on the money. But what does Jesus mean when he talks about his Father's house? We just kind of think about a house in heaven or, thanks to the King James, we think of a heaven full of golden mansions. But when Jesus talks about this Father's house he's talking about the temple. The temple in Jerusalem was the one place where heaven and earth—sundered by our sin—it was the one place where they still overlapped, where human beings could go to be in the presence of God.

What Jesus is getting at here, what he's hinting at is new creation. He's just told them to trust in God—the one who has a plan to set this fallen world to rights—and this is exactly why he's got to go away. It's part of the plan. His death will forgive sins and heal the breach between God and man. His resurrection will set the renewal of all things in motion and eventually bring heaven and earth back together. So these words aren't really about making a place for us to live in heaven when we die. It's about Jesus doing the work to bring heaven and earth, God and humanity back together. But we can still see why they're such popular words at funerals. At a time when everything seems dark. When we're feeling hopeless. When loss overwhelms us. When we feel the weight of sin and death at their worst. Jesus assures us that he's already there. We may not understand. We may feel lost. But he's there already. While we do the work of the Church here on earth, he's at his Father's side doing the heavenly part of this business of renewal. And one day he'll bring it all back together: heaven and earth, God and man, new creation, the world set to rights, every tear dried, and human beings living once again in the presence of God. Not "up there", but in this new temple that will encompass all of creation. That's where Jesus was going when Judas betrayed him, when the authorities crucified him, when they laid him in the tomb. And it's also where he was going after his resurrection from the dead when he ascended to his throne to send us the Holy Spirit.

And then Thomas. He blurts out, "But how? We don't know the way! We don't even know where you're going! We don't know the way there!" Brothers and Sisters, the words that really strike me there is that bit, "How can we know the way?" Thomas really had no idea what Jesus was talking about. We live on this side of the cross and empty tomb, this side of the ascension and we've got a better idea. We understand—or I hope we

do!—that Jesus was going to his death and we understand why. Maybe we still struggle with the ascension. But we've got a much better grasp on these things than Thomas did in the Upper Room. But so often we still don't know the way. Or we once knew it, but we took that path and it didn't seem to be getting us anywhere, so we're trying another one. Once we knew it, but we've been distracted along the way. Once we knew it, but that path led to hardship or opposition so we've decided to try a different route.

Brothers and Sisters, think again of the two men we commemorate today. Philip and James were surely just as lost as Thomas as they sat around that Passover table listening to Jesus. But when they met the risen Jesus, just like the other disciples, they understood. And they set out on the path laid before them and they walked it faithfully, even though it led to their own deaths. They trusted in God and they trusted in Jesus, too.

I've been thinking of the conversations I've had this last week or so. How does the church navigate these difficult times? My pastor friend talked about the people who had left his church to go to another. Why did they go? Almost always it's because they're looking for a program or for something new and exciting. That church has a program that our church doesn't have. Or that church has better musicians, better singers, better mood lighting, better coffee. Again, it's the consumerist minds of our culture creeping in to how we think about church. No one seems to ask the really important question: Is that other church really centred on Jesus and the good news? And am I leaving a Jesus- and gospel-centred church for one that isn't? Am I being driven by a consumerist mindset instead of a gospel one? We talked about other folks we know leaving churches because they were afraid of getting sick during the pandemic or others who left over political issues

surrounding masks and vaccines—some for and some opposed. And all we can see is people losing sight of Jesus—putting other things and other issues ahead of him and ahead of the gospel. Neither fear nor politics will lead us where Jesus has gone, to that place he's preparing for us.

And, as churches, it's often tempting to forsake the path that Jesus has called us to walk. Maybe it's that we Christians were, for almost two thousand years, the driving force in our culture, and now that's all gone. Increasingly it's not even a neutral thing to be a Christian anymore. Now we're haters and bigots on the wrong side of history. No one wants to be in that position. And so whole swaths of the Church have begun to cave to cultural pressure—especially on issues of identity, whether that's sex or race, on issues of sex and sexuality, or the uniqueness of Jesus and the gospel to save. Don't get me wrong. As Jesus' people, we need to be squeaky clean. If we're guilty of sin. If we've harboured sinful ideas. If we haven't acted out of love. We need to repent of those sins. But the standard for right and wrong has to be the Scriptures, not the winds of culture—and especially not a culture that has forsaken the gospel and God's word. In our post-Christian culture, trying to gain the world's approval will never lead us to Jesus—it will inevitably lead us down a different path. And if we go down that path, we'll never bring the culture to Jesus either. The same goes for politics. I don't care which political side or party it is, if we make politics our agenda, it may attract people, but will not lead us—or them—to Jesus.

And it's tempting to lose our focus on faithfulness and to get carried away with numbers. People will come if we add this program or that activity. What can we do to make things more exciting and to attract more people—nevermind the people we're attracting are coming from other churches.

Brothers and Sisters, that's not church growth; that's just sheep stealing.

What do we do? We don't know the way? Look again at what Jesus says in verses 6 and 7:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is the way, and the truth, and the life. Our lives as his people and our life as his Church need to be centred on him. That's how we get where he's gone. That's how we will one day find ourselves in the age to come—and how we will, with the help of the Word and the Spirit, get the world to that day. This is the truth that must have hold on us. This is the truth that has to shape everything we do. Everything is about Jesus and everything we do centred in him. And knowing that, we must be utterly devoted to that, remembering that he is the one who gave his life for our sake. He is our life. He is the driving force and motivation for everything. We love him because he first loved us. And now we preach him, proclaim him, live him because we can do nothing else. That's the path.

It's at this point that Philip blurts out that question in verse 8:

Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father.

I'll close with this. Philip had Jesus. He had the way the truth and the life, but he didn't fully understand. He still wanted the Father. Wanting the Father was good. But he still wasn't grasping that Jesus was the way to the Father—that he and the Father were one. And I think as the Christians and

as the Church we can find ourselves in a similar place. We want the Father. But we forget that the way lies with Jesus. We forget that Jesus is the one who reconciles us to God by the cross. We forget that it is he, the word of God who reveals the Father to us. We forget that it is his gift of the Spirit that empowers us to live for him and to go out in the world in his name. We forget and we start turning to all sorts of other things. Again, we think a program will bring people to Jesus. We think more exciting worship will bring people to Jesus. We think that bowing to the pressure of culture and being nicer than Jesus will bring people. Brothers and Sisters, it won't. Jesus leads people to Jesus. Our faithfulness to him and to his word and to his calling, coupled with the work of the Spirit in their hearts is what will bring people to Jesus and grow his church.

We're like Philip asking for Jesus to show us the Father. “Jesus,” show us the way!” And Jesus has been saying all along, “I am the way. Just commit yourselves to me. Plodding along in faithfulness beats cool and exciting. Earning the hatred of the world beats earning its praise. Jesus calls us to forsake the wide and easy way. That way leads to destruction. Instead, he calls us to walk the narrow way, the hard way, that even though it may lead to death, will ultimately lead us—and the world—to him and to life on the other side. Like Philip and James: Preach the gospel, die, and be forgotten. And if we are remembered, may it be only for faithfulness to Jesus and his gospel.

Let's pray: Almighty God, to truly know you is eternal life: Grant us perfectly to know your Son Jesus Christ to be the way, the truth, and the life; that, following in the steps of your holy apostles Saint Philip and Saint James, we may steadfastly walk in the way that leads to eternal life, through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you

and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*