

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, Year A - May 14, 2023

“The Why of the Resurrection”

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Acts 17:22-31 | Psalm 66:7-18 | 1 Peter 3:13-22 | John 14:15-21

Many years ago, I went to Easter Day service with my brother and his family. The youth minister, a gentle, friendly man, brought out an unexpected prop for the children’s Easter sermon—a casket. His voice was filled with awe when he lifted the lid of the casket and red balloons ascended to the ceiling. “Jesus has risen. He is in Heaven now with his Father.” My nephew, who was about five at the time, turned and asked his parents about his recently deceased grandfather. “Did Granddaddy rise to heaven, too?” Often simplifying complex concepts—like the resurrection—doesn’t help people understand them more clearly. For the rest of this sermon, let’s set aside the how, when, where to delve into the why, the purpose of the resurrection.

Just before today’s Gospel reading from John, Jesus is building up his disciples, who were still struggling to understand that he is about to leave their world. “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” These words were meant to comfort the disciples, but they could not accept this idea. After Jesus returned from the dead, he showed himself to Simon Peter and a half dozen other disciples who had returned from fishing. These men had been fishermen before Jesus called them to be disciples. After his death, they acted as though Jesus had

never existed. Their memories began to be restored only after he filled their nets with fish. Only then did one of the disciples recognize him.

Simon Peter's reaction to Jesus' return was fascinating. He "put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea." Like Adam and Eve who felt naked after they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and knew they had disobeyed, Simon Peter felt exposed and tried to hide. Jesus asked him three times if he loved him and Simon Peter's memory was restored--he remembered his three-fold denial. Before Simon the fisherman could once again become Peter the disciple, the rock of faith, he had to remember and atone for his past. Jesus forgave the disciples for their betrayal and broke bread with them. Once forgiven, the disciples were able to live out their vocation—to feed Jesus' lambs, to tend his sheep—but **not alone**. God sent the Advocate, the spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit, to teach the disciples, and remind them of everything that Jesus had said to them.

The resurrection brought new life **not only to individuals, but to whole communities**. The disciples were called not to live apart, but to put God's love into action in service to the community, to show compassion, and to forgive, as they had been forgiven. In our first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, Paul addressed Greek citizens who worshipped many gods. Paul appealed to their pride in leading a religious life. He must have been appalled by the number of gods worshipped by the Athenians, but Paul **remained on high ground**. "I see how extremely religious you are in every way," he said, complimenting them on their devotion. He observed there was even an altar to unknown gods. That gave Paul an opening to share his knowledge of the one, true God.

The God Paul knew made the world and everything in it. God did not live in shrines made by human hands. God chose the times and boundaries of all nations...why? So they would search for God, perhaps even grope for him and find him. Paul told the Greek citizens that God is not made of gold or silver or stone. God is not something or someone that human beings create or control. God is the creator, the provider, the sustainer.

What happens if the message is rejected or the messenger attacked? In today's second reading, Peter counseled the disciples not to fear what others fear, but to defend their beliefs with gentleness and reverence. They should not even show righteous anger. Peter taught them not to be intimidated, to keep their consciences clear. The disciples were called to allow the spirit of truth and love to flow from God through them into the world. We are called to do the same.

At the Water and the Word conference, our Bishop said that "We are one in Christ because each and every one of us has passed through the same water, the same baptismal water." That's easy to understand. Most of us have been baptized with water. Bp. Scharf continued, "Each and every one of us has been buried with Christ and raised to new life. Each and every one of us is a living, breathing, walking expression of God's new creation here on this earth." He did mean that literally. We are still alive—we did not die on the cross. We were not in the tomb. Christ experienced those things so that our lives might be transformed, and hopefully saved. The power of the resurrection lies in how it transforms our lives—it restores our memories, invites us to accept God's grace and forgiveness and to recommit ourselves to our vocations.

These ways of living in the world can help us to navigate differences in political and religious beliefs. Responding to criticism by calling people “haters” is not acting in love. We need to look harder for the things people are doing right, praise them for those things, then gently and reverently share our vision of a world saturated with God’s loving presence.

These high standards apply to communities as a whole and to institutions within communities. The Episcopal Church endeavors to be a good steward of its resources. How the Church chooses to redevelop its land after parishes and seminaries close reflects on the integrity of our institution. If a diocese chooses to build luxury apartments in a city that lacks affordable housing, like my Episcopal seminary has, what kind of message does that send to the world about our commitment to continue Jesus’ mission?

In a few minutes, during Holy Communion, we continue the tradition of table fellowship which reunited and bonded Jesus and the disciples. As the bread is broken, the priest says, “Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us. Therefore let us keep the feast.” The line comes from a longer prayer: “Christ being raised from the dead will never rise again. Death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once and for all but the life he lives, he lives to God. So consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ our Lord.”

The meaning of the resurrection is that we never again have to be separated from our loving, faithful God--the One in whom we live and move and have our being. As we take and eat the bread, the Holy Spirit flows into and through us, renewing our strength and guiding us back into our vocation—to feed Jesus’ sheep and tend the flock.