

Still wondering what it's all about?

A sermon preached by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Saint John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after Easter, April 26, 2009.

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them .you are witnesses of these things. Luke 24: 45, 48

The great good news of Christianity is all about the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Christ. Until the disciples saw him in a familiar context, they didn't always recognize him. In the gospel narrative today, the disciples are startled and even frightened thinking they are seeing an apparition. When Jesus speaks to them and shows them the marks in his hands and side and invites them to touch him and see that he is really alive, they are witnessing first hand the evidence of the resurrection. The marks of his suffering remind us that his gain required pain.

The setting in today's narrative is mundane if not pedantic. While talking with the disciples, Jesus asks for something to eat and the only thing they have to offer him is a piece of their broiled fish. It is when we are going through confusion and disbelief that something as ordinary as food helps us get back on track. The intersecting of the ordinary with the extraordinary can help us to focus. In the same way, the Eucharist nurtures our spiritual needs in the familiar elements of bread and wine reminding us of our own need for spiritual nourishment and our ongoing need to feed the world's poor and hungry.

The disciples are not dealing with an apparition but with a living resurrected body. The extraordinary thing about Jesus' post-resurrection appearances is that he is no longer subject to earthly human limitations and appears familiar at times and is not recognized at other times. Of the ten different occasions in which he appears to the disciples after the resurrection, this is the most vivid and startling of all.

Down through the ages skeptics and scholars have tried to analyze the mystery of the resurrection. I am sure such attempts will continue but far more significant is how this band of disciples who dispersed in fear gained the courage to be the foundation of the church. It is nothing short of miraculous that this bewildered and fearful group is transformed into a faithful community committed to give themselves completely for the cause of Christ. Those who had at first hid out in fear are courageously transformed to witness to Christ in the face of unspeakable threat of persecution. Only the power of the resurrection could produce people of such courage and conviction.

What does it take for the resurrection to be real and powerful in your life? Could such a power work a change in you as it did in them? Of course it can! Resurrection power has changed countless lives around the world and across the centuries. The enduring strength of the Christian church bears witness to what was thought couldn't be done. I have a sign that reads, "It can't be done." The apostrophe and the "t" are crossed out to read, "It can be done." When the apostles were first told that Jesus had arisen, their response no doubt was that it was impossible, it simply couldn't be done. The empty tomb and the risen Christ proved them wrong. Resurrection power is behind the ongoing story of faithful and committed Christians down through the ages.

We can rejoice in what happened even if we don't understand how it happened. We rejoice in what can happen when we see the impossible become quite possible. If everything could be explained in this life, we would have no need for faith. What is important is that

resurrection power can and does change peoples' lives. It can work in your life as it has in mine. Resurrection power enables us to do what we think we can't do. It enables us to take an unpopular stand for what we believe. It gives us strength when we're backed up against a wall and we think we can't take it anymore.

A very dramatic example of resurrection power occurred in November 1942 when five flyers in the Army Air Corps had to ditch their disabled flying fortress in the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. For three long weeks they endured the shark infested waters and grueling heat in rubber rafts out on the open sea. During their ordeal, the ranking officer took command and organized them into survival mode. They caught rainwater in a container and were able to catch fish and seagulls for nourishment. They were sustained by regular prayer, reading of scripture and singing hymns. God's sustaining presence became very real for each of them as they were helplessly tossed about in their watery hell. They were sustained in their grueling ordeal in the conviction that there are no atheists in foxholes or in life rafts. They were saved from certain death from exposure to the elements as well as the sharks that were their constant companions. Their story was recorded by one of the survivors in a book entitled, *We thought we heard the angels sing*.

Few of us have so dramatic a story as this, yet God intervenes in our lives in ordinary ways as people and events cross our paths to change the course of our lives. Resurrection power becomes real when our values are changed. What was thought to be important no longer has any significance. What was thought inconsequential becomes essential. Those diametrically opposed to each are reconciled. It's all about how love overpowers evil, truth wins out over falsehood and life triumphs over death.

To know the risen Christ in our midst is to recognize him in our daily interactions. He is reflected in our manner of life that reveals a gentleness of spirit. In the end, it is not words or weapons, but inner grace that is our most powerful source of energy and direction. More important than thinking that might always makes right, we discover that it works the other way around, that right that makes might. Doing the right thing has its own power. It is not intellect that brings understanding, but the heart that brings faith. That is why we must never assume that God is on our side but instead strive to be on God's side.

While we have the opportunity, let us strive to imitate Christ in all we do and say. Make your life a witness to knowing Christ and making him known. If you are faithful in this, you will be known for your sense of grace and mercy that comes only from God. That is how each of us can help change the shape of the world.