

Third Sunday of Easter – Year B – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 4.18.21

Today we read a second account of Jesus after the Resurrection. Last week the account was according to John, this week, we hear from Luke. All of the Gospel writers tell the story of the days immediately after the resurrection. All of the Gospel writers tell of Jesus coming among his disciples. The core of the early preaching of the church was the wonderful news that Jesus lives.

The natural question of human beings, from the disciples to our own day is: “How can this be?” How can the crucified, dead and buried Jesus be alive? It is this question that was at the root of the fear, the disbelief and the wonder that the Gospel writers acknowledge. In the present day, considering the story of the resurrection of Jesus and what that means to us as believers, we are tempted as well to ask, “how can this be?” It is the question we inevitably encounter when we try to share our resurrection faith with others.

“How can this be?” is the wrong question. Asking the question how, natural as that might be, is rooted in the attempt to know the things of God. If we can know the things of God if we can know how, then in some sense we can become God. That was the mistake that Adam and Eve made so long ago in the story of the Garden of Eden. God had created them, put them in the glorious garden, given them all that they needed, and God had only one instruction. In speaking to Adam, God said: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,...”. Eating the fruit of the tree of good and evil is the human attempt to know the things of God and thus to become equal to God. It is what caused the first humans to be cast out of the garden. And yet, human beings continue to persist in asking how can this be?

It was at the basis of the fear felt by the disciples in that locked room in Jerusalem. They had heard the account of the women who had found the tomb empty, they had heard Peter tell them of what he had seen, they had heard the story told by the two returning from Emmaus and still they answered the question “how” by assuming Jesus was a ghost, a being much feared.

When Jesus came into that room to be with those gathered there, his first words were “Peace be with you.” Peace was what the disciples were longing for and what they feared they would never know again. “Peace be with you” was not only a greeting but a gift. Peace, the peace of Christ can only be accepted when we put aside the question of “how can this be?” and step across the divide that separates knowledge from faith.

Jesus asks the disciples: “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” In these questions Jesus is not seeking information, not scolding but inviting them to take the first step from knowing with their heads to believing with their hearts. It is the first step in the transformation from the frightened band of disciples who had followed Jesus from Galilee to the witnesses who would go throughout the world telling the story of the ministry of Jesus, the story of the resurrection and the kingdom of God come near. In these encounters with the risen Jesus the disciples came to faith. And faith, in the words of the letter to the Hebrews is “the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things unseen.” The question of the disciples shifted for all time from “how can this be?” to the certainty that “He is risen.”

And so, we find ourselves, in 2021, on Whidbey Island, human beings with the same questions, thoughts, and doubts of those first disciples. Faith does not take away questions or doubt, and to have questions or doubt does not mean that we lack faith. Faith is of a different order entirely. It is what we accept and live within....as if it were true. And living in faith, over our lifetime we find that it is true.

There is much similarity between those first disciples in Jerusalem and each of us here in this place in the Spring of 2021. We have been living with the threat of infection with a virulent disease, one for which until recently there was no vaccine. Most of us have been living the past year with anxiety if not fear. We have been staying home for the most part, not living life as we had been accustomed to living it. Just like the disciples locked in that room in the house in Jerusalem. Like them, we were looking for security and safety. They in fear of human enemies, we in fear of a medical enemy.

What changed in the disciple's world to allow them to go from fear to witness? It was the experience of the risen Jesus. As we leave behind the lockdowns, social distancing, quarantine and masks what will allow us to go from fear to witness? For it is to witness that we are called as we regather as the community of St. Augustine's. But witness goes beyond ourselves. We are called to reach out to all of those who like us have been isolated and now may be ready to regather. We are called to witness to what we have as a community and the peace we find in faith. We witness by our words, by our actions and by our generosity of spirit. We witness by inviting others in to experience what we have found.

A part of the regathering for St. Augustine's in the days ahead will be a hard look at the needs of the community both ourselves and those around us. What do we need to create to sustain ourselves? What do we need to create to offer to those outside our doors?

The disciples who recognized the presence of Jesus in their midst re-invented themselves in ways they had no idea they would be called to do. They became witnesses. We have the opportunity to re-invent ourselves in ways we have not yet even imagined. As the disciples knew the risen Lord in the breaking of the bread, we will come to know the risen Lord in new ways through the same breaking of bread, Eucharist, and also through renewed fellowship. As the disciples began in Jerusalem, we are called to begin in South Whidbey. The prophetic words of Jesus are as true today as they were when first spoken, "you are witnesses of these things."

As we begin to think about coming back together imagine yourself in that upper room. What do you fear? What is it that you have missed most about the "old life"? What have you learned about yourself and others? What we are approaching is more than simply "coming back", more than simply returning to the way things were. We are regathering, which is a different order of think entirely. Regathering takes into consideration all that has happened over the past many months as we zoomed and huddled in our "bubble" or at least thought twice about going out among others. As we wore masks and wash and sanitized our hands. Jesus of course has been among us through it all, his presence available through bible and prayer, through worship and song. But now we are approaching the time when Jesus will be among us in a new way, a resurrected way as we gather to worship and greet one another. We will again hear the familiar words "The peace of the Lord be always with you" and we will be

able to be close enough to greet one another with a smile and a touch. What will that gift of peace be like for us. How will we offer the gift of peace beyond our community and our walls?