

Easter 2 – St. Augustine, Whidbey, 2015

What does the resurrection of Jesus mean to you, to your life, to our common life today in 2015?

Several years ago I was serving a church in another state. Every year on the Saturday after Easter we held a forum entitled, “Ethics after Easter.” We invited experts to help us understand the human genome project and racism and questions like, “Is there ever a “just” war?” It was our way of saying, “Resurrection matters in how we approach these big issues as well as our own daily personal and communal struggles.”

If we look at our first reading today, we see the early church after Pentecost trying to figure out the answer to the same question. In the fourth chapter of Acts we focus on the church in Jerusalem. If read in one way, we seem to have a socialistic society where those who have resources pool their common wealth, especially land, in order for everyone to have their basic needs met. Some of the copies of this text evidently have a slightly different version where the emphasis is placed on the wealthier members selling their property when someone in the Christian community has a need. In other words there wasn't an ongoing common pool, but those who were richer stepped forward to help those in need as it was necessary. And the apostles were the folks who managed those funds.

As I read this passage I thought of two different attempts at community life I know about. One I participated in personally. One I heard about from the organizer of the group. One was short lived. The other lived up to its commitment to its members.

The first group evolved in my third year of study at an ecumenical seminary in New York City. Ten of us on my floor began to pray Compline, the last prayers in the day's cycle, together every night. Once a week we had a common meal. After several weeks we began to dream of what might be the next step. Eight of us talked of traveling together to visit some of the great pilgrimage sites from Iona in Scotland to the southern tip of India. We dreamed big. Of course, this was going to cost a good bit of money. And we devised a plan for an independent study for the 8 during the January term. We would do research at a foundation library. We would invite potential donors or people who knew potential donors to our common room for supper. We would check out costs and finalize our itinerary. By the

second week into our four week independent study it was clear that only 4 out of the 8 were doing any work toward the project. By the end of four weeks the potential traveling community dwindled to four and after another couple of months we were two and finally decided to make individual plans. There was little monetary wealth in that group. Obviously there were different levels of commitment to the project. It was somewhat romantic to think of developing a community rooted in prayer in so short a time, and we didn't have the stamina to take the next steps out into the larger world.

That's a struggle for every community, isn't it? How to balance the inner life and the outer world. Thomas Merton, the great spiritual writer of the 20th century, spoke often of Contemplation in a World of Action. Elizabeth O'Connor wrote of the Journey Inward, Journey Outward.. If we only strive to build a relationship between me and my God, then our faith is sorely limited. If we only focus on social justice action, then we miss the grounding for what we do.

The other community I learned about was based in a church of another denomination in the same city where I served. It seems that in this large congregation, the pastor decided to try starting some small groups. His plan was to begin with one and then as that one solidified to divide that group and form new ones. The groups would periodically be dividing like cells in the human body. And this continual reforming, known from the start, would help the groups to not become clique-ish.

So he invited four couples, husbands and wives, to gather one evening and explained the plan. For the next session each person in the group was to write down a question or an issue that had been nagging at them personally. Each week one of those pieces of paper would be read and become the topic of discussion.

Three or four weeks into the meetings, one of the men's questions was drawn. We'll call him Herb. His was work related. It seems that the company he worked for was asking him to do tasks that he saw as unethical. He'd only been there a short time, but he had hoped to stay and grow with them. The job market was tight. He was married with 3 young children and his wife was not employed outside the home. The demands on him had been coming for a good while, but he'd recently been told that there was to be a meeting of representatives from across the country sponsored by his company. Part of his job was to be finding escorts and

perhaps prostitutes for these out of town visitors. He was appalled at the assignment. What was he to do?

After some questions and a long discussion, the other three couples in the group made this promise – if Herb decided that his work assignment was something he could not do and he told his boss this and he was fired, the community would financially help him until he found a new job. They would make sure he and his family's basic needs were met. Well, it happened. Herb declined to do the assignment. He was fired and the couples supported him and his family. It took a few months but he found a new job. Prayer and action walked hand in hand for that group. Resurrection, new life meant something for those who gathered together for prayer and support.

For the disciples gathered together behind closed doors for fear of the religious authorities, it took a while to figure out what resurrection meant for them. Thomas, often called Doubting Thomas, simply wasn't there when Jesus came the first time. The second week after Easter the disciples are still fearful. At the first visit, Jesus had laid out their task. They were to be mirrors for the world, calling all they met into the need for change, repentance, recommitment to the law of love. And they were to be bearers of shalom, peace, wholeness.

Jesus comes to them. They do not have to seek him out. Jesus returns for Thomas to encounter Him personally. There is no condemnation of Thomas and his request to see and touch Jesus' wounds. The offer is made for Thomas to touch him. We don't know whether he did or not. The Gospel story doesn't say. Jesus meets Thomas as he is and Thomas then is ready to proclaim the Good News, perhaps more vehemently than all the others. For him resurrection means that Jesus will be present even when Thomas is least willing to recognize him.

What does resurrection look like for you? What effect does the Empty Tomb have on your life?

Last week I was fortunate to attend the Easter Vigil at the National Cathedral in Washington. In the sermon one of the Canons spoke about people who come to her to plan the funeral of a loved one. There evidently is a poem making the rounds of the Washington, DC area that speaks of death as simply a transition in life. Don't worry, don't grieve, it says.

Everything is going to be all right. And the request by the survivors recently has been to use this poem instead of passages of scripture at the funeral. The Canon had been asking the loved ones that if what the poem said was true, why were they grieving? If death is simply another stage of life, why the tears? She asks them to think about what she said and to read the suggested scripture passages and talk with her the next day by phone. And in every case the funeral planners agreed that the stark promises of scripture would be read and not the poem.

In one sense, of course, death is simply another of life's passages. We begin to die the day we are born. But death is the great passage. We leave this earth and will never walk it again in the same form, if we are to believe the great messages of St. Paul. We leave behind loved ones. We leave behind work that is unfinished. We leave behind joys that cannot be experienced in the same way beyond death.

And yet our faith, especially this Easter season, says death doesn't win. Death doesn't win for us personally and death does not win ultimately in our world. Though we see death all around us, we boldly declare that new life is possible even in the midst of death. That's what resurrection means for us Christians.

[E.B. White wrote these words about his wife Katharine, who was planning the planting of bulbs in her garden even though she knew she likely would not live to see the spring.] There was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance.... The small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection.

Source: [Quoted in A Time to Live by Robert Raines](#)

How will you plot the resurrection this year? Amen.

FIRST READING: Acts 4: 32 - 35 (RCL, Roman Catholic)

Acts 4:32 (NRSV) Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

SECOND READING: 1 John 1: 1 - 2: 2 (RCL)

1Joh 1:1 (NRSV) 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-- 2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us-- 3 we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light and in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie and do not do what is true; 7 but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. 8 If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; 2 and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

GOSPEL: John 20: 19 - 31 (all)

John 20:19 (NRSV) When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21 Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22 When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

24 But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

26 A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the

doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28 Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29 Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. 31 But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.