

Our readings this morning all point us in the direction of living into faith and discipleship now that the joyous celebration of Easter Sunday is just a pleasant memory. To be sure, the resurrection was a singular event, an event to be celebrated; yet if we just leave it in the distant past and do not live into it right now – we have missed the point.

All of our readings from the New Testament are written in a time when the early church suffered persecution. If you look in the announcements section of the service bulletin, you will see that our Presiding Bishop has asked us to pray for churches that are suffering from similar persecution today. In just a few short chapters from our readings in Acts, Luke will be telling us about the martyrdom of Stephen. In our own time, we can watch martyrs in the making by watching YouTube. In the Revelation of John, John is encouraging the seven churches to persevere, reminding them that God was, is and is to be – the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, and that Christ Himself is ruler of all the kings of the earth. We need such reminders, too. Even in our Gospel passage, the disciples are huddled in fear and keep themselves in a locked room – a room that cannot keep out the

risen Christ. And we need this reminder especially – that there is nothing in this world that can keep out the risen Christ.

We have plenty of reason to express fear too. A religious fanatic turned suicide bomber can happen anywhere, as events in recent weeks have amply demonstrated. Our presidential primary season does little to inspire confidence – quite the opposite, in fact. Some despair. While some objective economic data suggests that we as a nation are doing well, we tend not to see it. Even here, as our numbers return to pre-Easter levels on this historically low attendance Sunday, we fear for the very existence of our parish community. Yet the risen Christ is in the midst of every one of these situations, though we may struggle to see it.

Psalm 150 tells how to approach the struggle. It starts, “Hallelujah!” Which is Hebrew for “Praise God.” Where shall we praise God? Everywhere! How shall we praise God? With everything at our disposal, with every musical instrument and with our whole body in dance, and with our whole being in attitude. Who shall praise God? Everything that has breath – every plant, every creature, all of creation! Why do we praise God? Not only because God is the beginning and the end. Not only because God was, is and is to come. Not only because God

in Christ has been raised from the dead.<sup>1</sup> We praise God because we trust God and are in relationship with God. It is in this trust and relationship that we come to belief. Trust and belief are really synonyms. And there is no relationship without experience with the other. And my friends, praise is the antidote for fear and doubt. Praise enables us to participate in God's mighty deeds – praise enables us to offer our whole selves to God.

I am convinced that each of us has more than one story about our own encounter with the divine. Maybe you are the one who has had cancer and found strength you didn't know you possessed and can only attribute it to God. Maybe you have had an extremely difficult situation and only your faith in God saw you to the other side. John McCain's experience as a prisoner-of-war is an example of this. Maybe you have struggled with addiction and it was only in surrendering to a higher power that the addiction was tamed. Maybe you have had a powerful dream that upon awakening lead you to discover your passion or alerted you to danger. You can only attribute this to divine intervention.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Satterlee, "Homiletical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word Year C, volume 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press) 2009, 387

For us to be reliable Christian witnesses, these stories need to be shared.

Our Gospel writer John, fully understood this. Throughout his Gospel he is showing us that we don't all come to belief in the same way. Some believe through signs – such as the healing miracles. Some believe because they noticed the neatly rolled up burial linens. Others believed because they recognized the risen Lord's voice. Still others believed because they saw the actual wounds and experienced in the flesh the risen Christ. They could converse with Jesus and touch Jesus. There is no one right way to come to belief, to come to trust. Thomas wanted what the other disciples had already received – the evidence of his own eyes. And when he had it, he was able to proclaim "My Lord and My God!" We don't have evidence like that. In the grand scheme of things, it wasn't long before the original witnesses were no longer among us. Not one of us today, not our parents, not our grandparent and so on, have seen the risen Christ. We have to rely on the biblical witness, on words if you will and we have to rely on each other to tell our stories of our own encounters.<sup>2</sup> This is how we have come to faith.

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<sup>2</sup> Martin E. Marty, "Theological Perspective," *Feasting on the Word: Year C, volume 2*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2009, 401.

Management Consultants will tell you that the questions we ask inform the answers we receive. Further what we measure becomes our focus. As stories are powerful, I have challenged the vestry to tell a story of how they have seen or experienced God at work in our parish community within the last month. The measure of our success as a parish community is not necessarily how many people come to our worship services and of those who do, how many financially support us. Perhaps a better measure is how many lives have we touched as the hands and feet of Christ over a given period of time? Another might be whether we have offered opportunities to go deeper spiritually and if so, did they bear any fruit? How well have we offered our whole selves to God? Are we praising God so well that we make doubt and fear disappear? Not in a way that is delusional, rather in a way that is life affirming, a way that shows the world that we are a resurrection people – an Easter people.

I invite you to tell me how you see God at work in our parish – and how you live into praising God with all your being. Drop me an e-mail, button hole me at coffee hour or however you best communicate. Share your story – eventually I'd like to create a series of vignettes to share

with the entire congregation demonstrating our lives as an Easter people.

I also invite you to be a little silly with me and shed our proper Episcopalian upbringing and praise God like Miriam did after God lead the Israelites through the Red Sea. The women danced all night long praising and exalting God – may our praise of God ease our own fears and shape our understanding of the resurrected Christ.

AMEN.