

Sermon Easter 3
Holy Trinity Episcopal Church
The Rev. Leslie M. St. Louis

When I was a little girl we attended St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Wiesbaden Germany, it is in fact, there, that I was baptized, first sang in the choir, was confirmed and first contemplated this walk from darkness to light that we all take in our Christian journeys, oft times more than once.

St. Augustine's sanctuary was ravaged by a fire long before we began to worship there and as devastated church members cleaned out the rubble of the church one of the things they found was the charred and blackened corpus of Christ that had once been part of the crucifix that hung over the now destroyed altar. Gone was the wooden altar, gone was the wood of the cross but remaining, intact although deeply scarred, with fissures and cracks wracking the body was the figure of Christ. So out of the dark ash of their former church and their previous lives they resurrected the body of Christ.

One of the things I remember viscerally was that body, burned and blackened; contorted and cracked but intact and hanging in the Narthex of the church, presiding over the place through which all of us entered. It was there, I would soon learn that the procession always began, under the specter of death but moving from that place into the light of the sanctuary through the congregation, the body of Christ gathered, carrying the living word, arriving at the table under the Christus Rex, the symbol of the living and risen Lord.

So we gather this day with two images present in our minds don't we? We have, of course, front and center the image of the beautiful Easter day celebration, which writer Bill Broadway described this way in The Washington Post:

Churches are festooned with bright flowers celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus, huge choirs sing of the joy of renewal, and worshippers crowd into tiny churches or gigantic cathedrals. Attendance swells to a level unimaginable at any other time of year, including Christmas.ⁱ

And we have the image of Good Friday looming not too far off in some dimly lit corner, the happy Hallelujah's don't quite drown out the harrowing shouts of crucify, the light doesn't quite cover the dark, the place we end doesn't quite erase the place we began.

And yet we come year after year. The parade makes its way from darkness to light from death to life, packed tightly together are the faithful and the curious, the believers and the skeptics, those whose eyes are opened and those who cannot see sit side by side certain that something will happen.

Most people come to church on Easter because they have heard this outlandish claim about Jesus rising from the dead, and they want to know whether or not it is true. So they come, believers and skeptics alike, hoping to be inspired by the beautiful music, hoping to catch the enthusiasm of the huge crowd of people, hoping that the preacher will give them some proof that Christ is not dead but alive. "Is he really alive?" we all wonder, "and if so, how can we recognize his presence in our midst and in our world?" We come hoping to see Christ resurrected from the ashes of life and walking among us, presiding over the progression we make.

Today we hear the story of Cleopas and his companion as they walk away from Jerusalem, away from the cataclysm that has overtaken their lives, away from the ashes....toward....toward what....we don't know. But as they walk despairingly discussing the events of the last days, the loss of the last days, the devastation of the last days someone they don't recognize comes and walks alongside them.

Luke tells us "their eyes were kept from recognizing him." In fact none of the disciples recognize the risen Lord when they see him. Not Mary in the garden, not the disciples in the upper room nor later on the beach as he prepares them breakfast. Had Christ changed so dramatically that he was now completely unrecognizable? Or was it perhaps something in the disciples themselves that kept them from seeing....kept them from experiencing....kept them from believing that the one who had died, lived.

In an essay in *The Christian Century*, Presbyterian minister Susan R. Andrews suggests:

Modern disciples come straggling through the church door weighed down by cynicism, stress, pretense, power ... They, like the first disciples, yearn for the living presence of God. But they are too preoccupied, too suspicious, too busy to

*actually recognize God. In their objective world of fact and truth and matter and money, the church's world of mystery and meaning and risk and relationship seems silly.*ⁱⁱ

Rather a harsh indictment of the disciples of Christ. It would seem even from the very first unto the very last the disciples of Christ miss the presence of the one who brings them life.

We are told that Cleopas and his friend recount for this stranger all that has happened to them, all that they have experienced and all that they have lost and all for which they hope. We are told that this stranger “interprets” it for them but it is not enough they still don’t get it. We are told that Cleopas and his friend ask this stranger to stay and then suddenly this strange guest becomes the host and Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them. At that moment, a moment of wide-eyed wonder, a moment not unlike many they had encountered during their life with Jesus, they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. At that moment Jesus who was dead becomes Christ who is alive. At that moment grace happens. Writer Annie Lamott says: “I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”ⁱⁱⁱ

I suspect that nearly everyone in this room has had the experience of the death of someone we love, someone who helped us become us. Remember those early days of grief when you wander around in unbelief, and searching, searching for something anything that will assure you that they are ok and more than that that you will know them still. I also suspect that everyone has had that moment of grace when the familiar of them comes to meet you. For one of my parishioners in Rochester it was in the smell of yeast as she punched down a loaf of bread that her mother became present again, for another it was his son echoing his grandfathers “that’s a homer” when he heard the bat strike the ball as the Red Sox played, for me it was the smell of pipe tobacco as I opened a box of my father’s manuscripts; for the disciples and for us gathered here it is in the breaking of the bread. It is in these moments that grace meets us and moves us from unbelief to belief from “he is not here” to “he is risen.”

We begin, yes, under the specter of death in fact our baptismal service says these words:

We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water.

Over it the Holy Spirit moved in the beginning of creation.

Through it you led the children of Israel out of their bondage
in Egypt into the land of promise. In it your Son Jesus
received the baptism of John and was anointed by the Holy
Spirit as the Messiah, the Christ, to lead us, through his death
and resurrection, from the bondage of sin into everlasting life.

We thank you, Father, for the water of Baptism. In it we are
buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his
resurrection.^{iv}

But if you choose to walk the dusty and unknown road to leads to the place of
warm springs, the place of the well spring of life, Emmaus, you will end bathed in
the light of eternal life.

Amen!

ⁱ Bill Broadway, "The Easter Turnout" in *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1999, p. B7.

ⁱⁱ Susan R. Andrews, "Holy Heartburn" in *The Christian Century*, April 7, 1999, p. 385.

ⁱⁱⁱ Annie Lamott *Traveling Mercies*

^{iv} Baptismal Service *The Book of Common Prayer*