

April 18, 2010 - Rev. Anne E. Hodges-Copple [PDF] (Acts 9:1-6; Revelation 5:11-14; John 21:1-19)

Peter and the disciples have seen the risen Lord twice before including the time Jesus, as we heard last week, comes and appears to them in the upper room, finds a way to appear through locked doors. It's pretty amazing stuff -- rising from the dead, showing up out of nowhere, getting into locked rooms. Sounds like there's a lot going on. A lot's changed. What should you do? Well, Peter says, "Let's go fish." Apparently Peter thinks it's time to get back to business as usual. So what are we supposed to do? Well, let's go do the things we've always done.

But after the disciples go out that early morn and catch nothing, as they turn back toward the shore, the disciple whom Jesus loved, it's a disciple not given a name in the Gospel of John, but known as the beloved disciple, that disciple looks to the shore and he can see Jesus and he tells Peter, "There is Jesus speaking to us." And Peter does a curious thing. He pulls on his clothes and jumps into the sea to rush to see his Lord. Given Peter's earlier faintheartedness at remaining at the side of his Lord, one wonders why he is not sticking to the back of the line. But Peter, who once denied Jesus, jumps in the water at the recognition of Jesus. Sounds very baptismal.

In this way this curious chapter here in the last chapter of the Gospel of John if you look at it closely tells the entire story of the Gospel over again. Peter, who once denies Jesus, jumps into the water in recognition of Jesus -- it's baptism. Jesus nourishes his friends abundantly. Just as he once filled empty jars with more wine than any wedding party could possibly need, he fills empty nets with more fish than anyone could possibly haul except a disciple filled by the spirit of resurrection. Jesus, the source of abundant life. Just as on the night of his betrayal, Jesus fed his disciples, here again in these early hours of that first Easter season, Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to his friends. Jesus is again the host at the Eucharist. And just as Peter denied Jesus three times, he is asked by Jesus three times, "Do you love me?" It's all there. Jesus is there where he shouldn't have been, the fish are there where there weren't any moments ago, community that has been destroyed and scattered is not just re-gathered, but transformed. And Peter and Jesus have reconciliation where there could have easily been just repudiation. It's all there at this tender, sit-down family meal. The resurrected Jesus gives his friends what I might call the new stations of the cross, the Easter stations of the cross -- baptism, Eucharist, reconciliation, healing and a call to ministry. "Follow me," Jesus tells Peter. "Follow me," Jesus tells us. "Follow me through and use these sacred guideposts for our journey on the way."

But there's something else here in this account, some strange little verses tacked there at the end of this morning's reading, something a little surprising here on such a pretty Easter morning in a lovely Easter setting -- death. Jesus is also helping Peter be prepared for death. The passage ends in this curious way, and admit it -- admit it, when you hear this passage, you think of your own mortality -- "You will stretch out your hands and someone else will take you where you do not want to go." Someone else will take us where we do not want to go. Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Though we can't know for sure, tradition teaches us that Peter is eventually martyred in Rome, put to death by the Emperor Nero due to his apostolic and heroic and unapologetic preaching and teaching. This from our once cowardly Peter.

Here at this Easter moment of celebrating new life, Jesus brings up death. Who preaches about death during Easter? I do. Resurrection is God's own great reversal of fortune. The witness of the New Testament is that Jesus was raised from the dead. The argument of the New Testament is that in the resurrection, God is doing a new thing and Jesus is the first man of the new resurrection. Let me tell you folks, people in first century Palestine were no more gullible than we are. It's not that they believed in things that we're too scientific, practical and down to earth and material to believe. They were just as shocked and surprised, horrified and delighted as we are that Jesus is raised from the dead with a new and immortal body. This is the agreed upon witness of the New Testament and the early church. His body is different as ours will one day too be different. According to Saint Paul, we will be raised from the dead at the sound of the last trumpet, at the end of this age, at the creation of the new heaven and the new earth when God raises all of the dead. Heady stuff, hard to imagine stuff. Somewhat hard to believe stuff.

In Jesus, death is defeated, but not destroyed. Death cannot hold Jesus in the grave, but we know, as Peter is reminded, that death still awaits us. It's still a part of our earthly pilgrimage. It is still a part of our Easter stations of the cross. Sure, we sing these hymns, "The Strife is O'er, The Battle Done, The Victory of Christ is Won, but you know that one about "Oh, Death, Where is Thy Sting, Where is Thy Victory?" Those words from Isaiah quoted by Paul set to beautiful music by Handel, that's sung at the end of time. Death still has its sting. Grief and sorrow is still with us. Can resurrection address that?

T.S. Eliot begins his poem "Wasteland" with this observation. "April is the cruelest month." I love April. It's my birthday month. It's a lot of your birthday months, I happen to know that. It's the month when I watch this incredible tree out one of my house windows that goes from completely barren to the tiniest, lightest, most delicate little green leaves and grows and grows and blossoms and darkens and becomes this rich, glorious celebration of new creation. I love it! Where spring and color is bursting forth everywhere. Now, I might argue that T.S. Eliot believed April is the cruelest month because those of us who suffer from allergies have to sneeze our way through this lovely month.

But that is indeed not what Eliot is addressing in "Wasteland." As the poem begins, a young woman finds that these early signs of spring are an unwelcome intrusion into her grief. In fact, grief and sorrow permeate this poem. The woman would prefer to stay buried in whatever kind of warmth she had found in the hibernation of winter. She finds that the green blades rising, breaking through the cold and still damp ground distressing. "April is the cruelest month, breeding lilacs out of the dead land, mixing memory and desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain. Winter kept us warm, covering earth in forgetful snow, feeding a little life with dried tubers."

Among the many possibilities back stories to Eliot's lament is the story of the loss of a dear friend during World War I. The friend only a year or so earlier had hailed his friend Eliot across a field by waving a branch of lilac only to fall months later in the muddy fields of Gallipoli. April is the anniversary of Gallipoli, one of the most horrific, deadliest, costliest battles of the entire first World War. It is still the commemoration of the war dead that receives the most attention in Australia and New Zealand where so many of those soldiers who died were from.

"Wasteland" is the lament for the waste of war, for the loss of love, for the comfort that we need and find in our grieving. The month of April brings all kinds of cruel anniversaries. Sad memories of the assassination of Dr. King, the bombing of the Murdoch federal building in Oklahoma, the massacre of students in Columbine and Blacksburg. April's prodigious gushing forth of vivid color does not nullify the decay of death or the power of hate. In fact, I wonder if there might even be some perverse relationship between an exterior landscape where the green blade riseth and the interior landscape of a soul lost to the powers of hate and murderous rage. Eliot's poem is a lamentation for loves and lives lost. A community that would authentically and joyfully shout "Alleluia, He is risen" must also be a community strong enough to face death, brave enough to proclaim God's abiding presence and compassionate enough to bear and share one another's sorrows.

We are called to be those people, the Easter people. But what does that mean? What does resurrection really mean to you? Is it the love of God or the warmth of the sun that has you springing out of bed with a little more energy? Is it the promise of eternal life or just the promise of a longer day that inspires you to go forth rejoicing in the beauty of creation? I hope that the promise of resurrection means something hardier, something more enduring than daffodils and candied eggs because we need the hope of the resurrection to help lift and carry the sorrows of cruel deaths in West Virginia, of tragic deaths in a field in Russia, of heartbreaking deaths in Afghan villages cut down by friendly fire.

Only if we as the church, we as the disciples of Christ who gather for baptism and Eucharist and marriages and funerals and for the third Sunday in Easter -- where are all those people from the first Sunday in Easter -- only as we continue together for healing and peace will the world know and have and see the kind of practices, the kind of shape of life that gives us the courage to create communities capable of sharing sorrow as well as joy, capable of answering evil with an overcoming power of goodness. Do we have that kind of strength? In a culture that does everything it can to worship youth, worship money, worship success and affluence, in a culture that does everything it can to deny, to disguise, to hide death, are we committed to these daily practices that strengthen us to the tasks at hand and the trials ahead?

If we want to share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then we must jump out of our safe boats of business as usual and into the chaotic and heroic waters of baptism and discipleship. We must listen for the voice of Jesus and follow him. The world has not changed, we have. And while the impotence of the world's supposed powers have been unmasked, the life giving power of God's mercy and justice must be revealed in us. Resurrection is our sacred reversal of fortune. Death is not the last word. Jesus is the first word and the last word, the Alpha and the Omega. Resurrection is the divine promise that nothing -- not the powers of sin, not the powers of death -- nothing, except our own rebellion, will ever separate us from the love of God. And it is the love of God that will restore us to the living presence of those who have gone before. With this kind of blessed assurance, we can live with more than just hope for the future. We can live with a sense of purpose and courage for today.

Let us pray. Risen Lord, grant us, your servants, the courage to be the visible embodiment of your reconciling love for the world. Risen Lord, grant us, your disciples, the courage and wisdom to build up the community of saints on earth supported by the communion of saints who have gone before us. Risen Lord, grant us compassion to share the healing presence of Jesus Christ with those who grieve or carry other burdens or sorrows. Come, Risen Lord, be our guest in our hearts and welcome us as beloved guests to your table. Amen.