

AT THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL...

Easter – Year A: Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

Although none of us made it to church this morning before the sun rose, I awoke early enough for it still to be the dark of night. And always pondering the custom of our tradition of sunrise services on Easter Sunday – I attended my first sunrise service when I was 17; it had not been part of our family or church tradition when I was growing up – I gained a new insight this year, thanks to studying our First Reading from the Book of Acts. Our reading from Acts this morning has us joining Peter, Jesus' most conspicuous disciple, in the midst of what we can accurately describe as "doing the work of the Lord." Peter and the other disciples, called by the Spirit in the winds of Pentecost, have taken Jesus' message to the streets, so to speak, in a way no one could have envisioned. And what is fascinating in this particular account of their "work" is how we see the darkness within Peter concerning how he has believed Gentiles to be beyond the grasp of God's grace in Jesus give way to the sunrise (if you will) of the gospel. With 20/20 hindsight, we have no trouble seeing how inclusive Jesus' ministry was: but most occasions for Jesus' reaching out to Gentiles in the gospels are accidental, and it is quite reasonable that Peter viewed these "accidents" as exceptions to Jesus' focus on (as he says in Matthew's gospel) "the lost sheep of the house of Israel." What has changed, however, is the context for Peter's ministry. He is in Gentile territory and his preaching and teaching is now, as a result of taking Jesus' message "to the streets" reaching an increasingly wider audience of which Gentiles are a part. Peter has resisted a mission to the Gentiles. But a day or so before the passage we have as our First Reading, this morning, he has a profoundly disturbing dream concerning eating food deemed unclean in the Torah. In the dream, were "all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds of the air." He hears God's voice tell him to "get up, to kill them, and eat." Peter objects, citing his ritual purity. "I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean," he tells God in the dream. God shoots back, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane."

The dream notwithstanding, Peter is still in the dark (if you will) about Gentiles – until he is visited by two messengers from a Roman centurion named Cornelius. Cornelius has had a vision concerning the acceptability of his devotion to the teachings of Jesus and his desire to become part of the Jesus Movement. Peter responds to the visit by Cornelius's messengers by travelling to Caesarea, meeting with Cornelius, and comparing his vision with Peter's recent dream.

We might normally call this an "Aha!" moment Peter has concerning the inclusivity of the gospel, but given that this is reading for Easter Sunday, I don't think that it is much of a stretch to call it a "sunrise" moment. He begins, "I truly understand that God show no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears [God] and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ - he is Lord of all."

"After darkness, light" we shall hear our choir sing (at the 10 a.m. festival service this morning/in a few minutes): darkness within and without; our darkness and the darkness in the world around us. "Jesus Christ is the light of the world" we sing as we begin Evening Prayer; "the light no darkness can overcome." On the day of our baptism, we are charged with the words, "Let you light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." After darkness, light, sunrise, illumination, understanding, the grace of a whole community made whole by nothing less than the gospel itself embodied by Jesus and now "taken to the streets" by Jesus' disciples, you and me, the people of the Way, the children of light.

Earlier this week, Alicia Becker and I met to discuss and plan what we would say this morning: she always likes to know ahead of time which tack I plan to take with the Sunday readings: especially on Easter Sunday, she doesn't want a miscue. I told her how in an earlier time I had struggled with the mystery of Jesus' resurrection; that the early insights of the Jesus Seminar had caused me to question my faith in the Resurrection. And as we spoke, I remembered that it was an initial conversation I had with a friend who had walked this dark road before me and then a close study of the gospels themselves that prepared the sunrise of understanding I now carry. And that sunrise is that the whole of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the proclamation of resurrection; that everything he said and did – all the teachings concerning how unbounded is God's love, how complete is God's grace, how steadfast is God's faithfulness – are nothing less than the proclamation of resurrection. Complete strangers are raised from

sickness into health; sinners are raised from the prison of their own desires and actions into the freedom of new life in Christ, a life unfettered by guilt and regret; people who are rejected from their own communities become part of the new community of faith as people of God in Christ Jesus – the ministry of welcome never ends; people who are slow learners when it comes to living the risen life are forgiven over and over and over again – seventy times seven – or as many times as it takes, in other words, for them to, as Peter says, “truly understand” that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. It is all resurrection! At the heart and centre of everything Jesus said and did is this lifting up of the darkness of the human condition into the light of God's love and blessing, God's mercy and grace for a world, a people for whom God would even die in order that the message might be received as unambiguous and authentic. I no longer struggle with resurrection, because I know it to be true. I not only see it, I have experienced it as my own darkness of doubt has given way to the sunrise of faith; as my life of questions has given way to a deep sense of God's grace at work within me and within our world community.

And so, here we are two thousand years later, called not to question Jesus' resurrection, called not to the darkness we all carry concerning misunderstanding this world God has made clean through Jesus' death and resurrection, but called rather to proclaiming the light of the gospel – in the darkness.

In the dark of that first Easter, God rolled away the stone, perhaps in an earthquake – Matthew remembers an earthquake – and Jesus broke through the final darkness, the darkness of death.

At the heart of the gospel is resurrection, sunrise, light, warmth, beauty, love, community, forgiveness, promise, joy. It is from our darkness that we proclaim Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed. After darkness, light!