

REDISCOVERING JESUS THROUGH THE EYES OF FAITH

(04/04/10)

Scripture Lesson: John 20:1-22

“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.’” (John 20:19)

Happy Easter to you! As our Greek Orthodox brothers and sisters would say today, for today is Easter in the Eastern Orthodox as well as the western church, “*Christos Anesti!*” “Christ is risen!” To which, if you were Greek, you would say “*Alithos!*” which means “Truly!” “Indeed!” or “*Alithos Anesti!*” “He is risen indeed!”

Just as once every few years Easter falls on the same day for the eastern and western churches, it also occasionally falls on the first Sunday of the month, which is communion Sunday in our church. To participate in the Sacrament of Holy Communion on Easter is especially meaningful because it is not only a reminder of the Last Supper, the time that Jesus spent with his disciples in the Upper Room, it is one of the ways that we experience the presence of our risen Lord. Jesus invites us to experience his presence both within us and among us whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup.

There are many ways to think about Easter. One of the common themes of Easter is the empty tomb. An anonymous author has written,

The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contain the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian pharaohs. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned because it contains the bodies of English royalty and nobility. Mohammed’s tomb in Media is noted for the stone coffin and the bones that it contains. The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery is meaningful because it is the final resting place of four unknown soldiers who died in our nation’s wars.

There is, however, all the difference in the world between the tomb of Christ and these famous burial grounds. These honored locations are famous and draw visitors from far because of what they contain, while the Garden Tomb is famous because it is empty.

This little passage is a reminder that, even in our own lives, death does not have the last word. Gail Dunham, in her poem entitled “The Tomb,” has written,

*The tomb – silent, deserted,
but not forgotten.
Strong walls ,a stone door
could not restrain the Holy One.*

*Did they think earth could entomb almighty God,
the Messiah?
What force is great enough to abort
God's eternal plans?
The empty tomb, a monument attesting to
God's Ultimate victory.
Peer into the darkness; sense the emptiness
and rejoice.
He didn't linger here.
He had to be about his Father's business.*

The disciples experienced the human Jesus. They traveled with him, broke bread with him, listened to his teachings, and witnessed his healings. They saw him die on a cross. They were there when his broken body was placed in a tomb.

Only a few days later they hear the witness of Mary that the tomb is empty. Peter and John run to check it out. The tomb is indeed empty.

The empty tomb is an important part of the Easter story. It teaches us that death was not the end of Jesus' life. It teaches us that death is not the end of our life or the lives of those we love. However, I think Easter is about much more than an empty tomb. An empty tomb is just empty. There is nothing in it. Nobody. No body.

I think the deeper message of Easter is what follows after the discovery of the empty tomb. The deeper meaning of Easter is about rediscovering Jesus. As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning, Mary rediscovers Jesus in the garden. That very evening the disciples rediscover Jesus in the house where they are staying. They later encounter him by the side of the lake, on the road to Emmaus, and in Galilee. This rediscovery of Jesus, this experience of the risen Christ is what changes them from disciples into apostles, from followers of Jesus into those who carry out his ministry.

We meet here on Easter Sunday in this beautifully decorated sanctuary, resplendent with lilies and tulips, the harbingers of spring, to remember and to celebrate that first Easter. But we are called to do more than this. If we are to actually experience the true meaning of Easter, we need to rediscover Jesus. The true meaning of Easter is not that the tomb was empty. The true meaning of Easter is that "He lives!"

As we heard in our scripture lesson this morning, Jesus appears to Mary and the other disciples in a slightly different form. This means that we, like Mary and the other

disciples, have to look carefully if we are to discover or rediscover Jesus. We have to look or see through the eyes of faith.

It is clear from the testimony of scripture that not everyone rediscovered the risen Christ. In fact, only those who had faith, who trusted in his promises were able to see him. Like Mary and the other disciples, we too can rediscover Jesus, but only if we see through the eyes of faith. If we do not see through the eyes of faith, we will see only an empty tomb.

When we see through the eyes of faith, we will encounter, experience, or rediscover Jesus in many different ways. We will encounter Jesus or be encountered by Jesus in worship and in the sacraments. We will encounter him or be encountered by him when we read our sacred scriptures or when we turn to him in prayer.

When we see through the eyes of faith, we will discover or rediscover Jesus in our brothers and sisters. We will encounter Jesus in those whom he called “the least of these.” We will rediscover him in the unemployed, in the homeless, in the sick, in the downtrodden, in the prisoner, and in those who are very different from us, those who don’t look like the pictures we have of Jesus in our Bibles.

When we see through the eyes of faith, we will discover or rediscover Jesus in the people who are a part of our everyday life. If Jesus can be present in the “least of these,” then Jesus can also be present in our loved ones. When we look at the members of our family, those with whom we are close and those from whom we are alienated or estranged, we will be able to see Jesus.

Finally, the message of Easter is that we need to discover or rediscover Jesus within ourselves. When we look at ourselves with the eyes of faith, when we try to see ourselves as God sees us, when we look at both the light and the shadow, the moments when we are strong and the moments when we are weak, we will be able to see Jesus. As our communion hymn attests, we will rediscover Jesus within our hearts. We will experience his presence in the midst of our conflicts and struggles. We will feel the power of his healing presence.

If we can do this, if we can see through the eyes of faith, we will rediscover Jesus. What happened to Mary and the other disciples can also happen to us. When

we do this, when we rediscover Jesus, we will understand that the true meaning of Easter is not the empty tomb but the joyous acclamation “He lives!”

It is because of our faith in the risen Christ that the Sacrament of Holy Communion is so meaningful to us, especially on Easter Sunday. It is through faith that we, like the disciples of old, can once again enter into the presence of our risen Lord. Through faith, we can both see and experience the meaning and the message of Easter: not that he lived, or even that the tomb was empty, but that he lives!

Let us now join our hearts as we share together in the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Let us open both our eyes and our hearts that we might rediscover our Lord in these common elements of bread and wine. If we can rediscover him not only in prayer, in worship, and in the sacraments but in our fellowship, in other people, and also within ourselves, we will have grasped the true meaning of Easter.

*An Easter communion meditation shared by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson
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