

In the Midst of Us

Acts 4:32-35

INTRO:

Woody Allen once said, “**I believe in eternal life. I’m just afraid nobody will tell me where it’s being held.**”

Easter means that the risen Christ has come back to us. Jesus has taken his place among us. He is in the midst of us. Therefore, we have hope. This hope is not of our own creation. This is hope based on the presence of Christ among us, the power of God come *to* us, *beside* us, *with* us for all eternity.

It’s after Easter, after the crowds, and the joy, and the fear. Now the church gathers and considers the meaning of the resurrection on this “*low Sunday*.” We heard in the Gospel lesson is the wonderful story of how the risen Christ came and stood *among* his frightened disciples. It is a story of movement from **life** to **death**, from **fear** to **joy**, from **absence** to **presence**. The Church needs to remind itself that we have hope. Not because of something that we have *decided*, or *found*, or *created*, but based upon the *bright act* of a God who *hears*, who *cares*, who *moves* in and among us. If there is hope for humanity, it must be from a power that manages to be both **with** us and still **beyond** us, but not **arising** out of us.

We believe that hope is in the resurrection of Jesus.

Building on John's account of Jesus's appearance to his disciples, today's text shows the significance of the resurrection as the fact on which our faith is built.

We believe, not on the basis of our wishes, our emotions, our insight, but on the basis of the act of God in the resurrection of Jesus.

This is important. These days human actions tend to be the only actions. We think it is up to us to help ourselves if we are to be helped.

In George Herbert's poem, "**Come, My Way,**" the poet sings,

"Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life: such a way as gives us breath; such a truth as ends all strife; such a life as killeth death."

Here, in the resurrection of Jesus, is "**such a life as killeth death.**"

ME:

I always wish I could recognize God at work in my life more than I do. I am able to see and too help others see him at work in their lives, but as they say, "**Physician, he's thyself!**" The course I am taking at Richmond Hill is helping me to recognize God at work in my life better as is meeting with a Spiritual director. In fact, that's what Spiritual Directors do, they help you see and sense God at work in and through your life.

YOU:

How are you at recognizing God at work in your life? Can you sense Jesus in your midst? Let's turn to Luke in the book of Acts for some help in this:

GOD:

Acts 4:32 Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common. 33 With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. 34 There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. 35 They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

The Word of God, for us...

WE:

We see *First Church Jerusalem* in its *first* days. People who had nothing in common:

- different languages
- different nationalities,
- different economic groups— are together.

All sharing with each another. **How can this be?** You know how serious our differences are, the walls between us. **How can we overcome all these differences? Why in the world would these people share their property with one another?** John showed the disciples shivering behind shut doors, paralyzed by fear. Then, the risen Christ comes and stands among them, and they take heart. They realize that their story with Jesus is **beginning** instead of **ending**. And ... the church is born. The church...*that's us...is the community of the resurrection!* That gathering of people who have assembled because to Easter.

What is the difference between a community meeting and a worship service? What is the difference between a preacher and a public speaker? What is the difference between the gospel and fine, up-standing attitudes? What is the difference between prayer as just talking to ourselves, and prayer as ... communication with the power that moves the earth and the stars? Is there any reason for hope beyond whimsical wishful thinking? As you think about the great problems humanity faces, **is there any hope besides humanity?** The only hope worth having would be a hope that arises from something outside of us, some hope not completely dependent on us. At the same time a hope that reaches toward us. For thousands of years, people have said things like, **“There is within you a divine spark that must be ignited and allowed to glow. Therein is the hope. No one can help you but you yourself.”** But

history teaches, that this is **not enough**. There needs to be some word that is *more* than self-created. **Can there be a word that comes to us from the outside and yet is a word that includes us?** Just such an event has happened to the church. We have struggled to talk about it for the last two thousand years. When we speak about the origin, we are not talking about a new program for human improvement.

We are talking about the very basis of our faith, not faith in ourselves, but faith that there is hope beyond ourselves.

When people try to say something important, they speak to this hope using the language and the words they know. I read that when the early church tried to spell out that, in this Jesus of Nazareth, God has come so close to us that the course of our lives is radically altered, they struggled to find the words. You may have noticed differences in the Gospels of the stories of Easter. They speak of the risen Christ as if he were a ghost who just mysteriously showed up out of nowhere. As if he could walk through doors, as if he could do things we can't. This is their way of showing that in Jesus, God has met us in a real way. In these resurrection appearances, the veil is pulled back and . . . we see God. *We see God with us . . . in fullness and glory.* Some people say that the resurrection is a simply a **symbol** that the cause of Jesus lives on in the hearts and lives of his followers. That is not an adequate explanation for what happened after Easter.

Resurrection as a symbol will simply not explain the miracle of the church.

In the church, we see that something has happened to us that is both **outside** of us and **includes** us. That something is the resurrection. Rudolph Bultmann spoke of Jesus rising “**into the faith of his disciples.**” John Knox said that “**Jesus rose into the living memory of the church.**” Knox also said, “**To know the substance of the church’s life, is to know the resurrection . . . in having the church, we have everything.**” There is truth in that, of course. Faith does NOT need historical verification. Faith is not the result of our human aspirations, or our longings.

Faith is the result of being met by the living Christ.

THE SERMON IN A SENTENCE:

Faith is the result of being met by the living Christ in the Midst of Us

YOU:

How do you see God at work in your world? How will you work on seeing him, sensing him better?

CLOSE:

Every day thirty-five thousand children under the age of five die. They die because they do not have enough water, basic medical care, and food. Most of these children could be saved on any day with just a tiny portion of

what we spend on military budgets. What do we do in the face of such a grim statistic? Thirty-five thousand children! What we usually do is to tune out, to willfully distract ourselves to more pleasant information. After all, what can one person do? If it's all up to us to do right, then how will right be done? Easter is a source of hope, a means of confronting the evils of this world because Easter says that it is not all up to us.

An illustration, dearly beloved by preachers, is the “**Christ has no hands but our hands**” story. The story goes something like this:

*In a little European village, there was a church that had a statue of Christ with outstretched arms to the world. During some battle of the war, the statue was damaged. Both of the hands were broken off. The church made the decision to replace the statue with a sign that read, “**Christ has no hands but our hands.**” The sign is saying that if we do not do the work of Christ with our hands, the work of Christ will not be done. Christ has no means of impacting the world other than us and our efforts.*

Whether or not there is an actual statue of Christ somewhere in Europe with no hands, the story is just plain wrong in the light of Easter. The hands of Christ have NOT been blown off. The forces of evil tried to end the life and work of Christ. On the cross, they thought they had done so. But Easter vindicated Jesus. He is raised. God will NOT be defeated by the work of our hands or the lack of work. God is NOT completely dependent on us for

righteousness to be done. Our hands may *join with the hands of the risen Christ*, but our hands will **NOT** replace his hands.

It seems that the almighty “**personal psychological experience**” is the sole standard for truth in our age. There is no authority except my, me, mine, and my experience. The problem is, Easter is about an event that is quite beyond our experience, an intrusion into our world that reverses the patterns of our experience. Therefore, we cannot trust our experience to judge Easter. It is not enough merely to say that we do not believe it because we have never seen it. When the modern mind sets itself up as the judge and jury of all truth, it tends automatically to exclude an event outside the boundaries of the modern consciousness like Easter. It seems like the church has to keep reminding itself that there is Easter, that we are not alone, that it is not all left up to us, and that God has reached out to us, in resurrection, before we ever coulda think to reach out to God. This is a story about God coming to us in the risen Christ *before* we even thought about coming to God.

But now we can think about coming to God, *let's go to him now in prayer...*