

The Feast of the Resurrection (C)
Acts 10.34-43/I Corinthians 15.19-26/Luke 24.1-12
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
8 April 2007

“NO IDLE TALK”

~Paul H. Friesen~

Today is Easter, and you don't need to 'google it' on the internet to see how many hits you can get. The number would be beyond belief. On the other hand, we may have the white Easter we didn't want in place of the white Christmas we hardly got! But church attendance in Halifax is not quite the global measure of the significance of Easter.

People are saying, with their bodies, that something enormous has happened. Today is the celebration of the Resurrection, churches are packed in far off places and our parish bells have rung out with unnumbered bells in churches around the world: *Alleluia, the Lord has risen. He has risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Our musical instruments were muted on Maundy Thursday so that only our voices would sound out the pain of Christ's betrayal by his disciples. Just this morning they have found their voice again and fill our ears.

The sanctuary greeted us stripped bare of all its comforts on Good Friday. This morning it has been re-clothed again with linen and silver and brass and fragrant blossoms.

The table that was kept so very empty as we watched and prayed at the Vigil last evening, on Holy Saturday, is now prepared for the meal we call the Eucharist.

The more the realities of Holy Week weigh down our shoulders, the more liberating the reality of the Sunday of the resurrection will be.

The more difficult our lives have been this past year, the more wonderful is the announcement of Christ's triumph over death. Because Christians can't step back and applaud the resurrection—they always find themselves caught up in it.

Christ's victory was accomplished once, but it has echoed around the world ever since.

There are two great Easter mysteries. What happened? And what does it mean? Both are worth our attention on this great morning.

What happened to Christ—and what happened to Christ’s disciples?

One might hope, as a modern person, that if there was no good newspaper account of the resurrection (which there wasn’t), there might at least have been a good story teller to smooth the rough edges of the event (which didn’t happen). Or at least the church might have had the political sophistication to get rid of some embarrassing inconsistencies (which it didn’t).

In fact, the resurrection comes down to us in several different voices, largely unpolished, as the church seems to have been unconcerned to present a completely uniform experience of this first Easter mystery.

It is not that the resurrection is less important than anything else.

It has often been pointed out, that though the oldest records of Christianity (the epistles of St. Paul) never speak of Christ’s birth, they speak almost continuously of Christ’s resurrection. Likewise only two Gospels (which were written down a few decades after Paul wrote his letters) speak of Christ’s birth. Yet all four spend many of their few chapters on the last week of Christ’s life and conclude with the resurrection.

The Church confessed Jesus was God incarnate, the maker of the world in human flesh. Of course his birth was, looking back, the first sign of his incarnation of the Virgin Mary. But the part of the life of Jesus Christ that first riveted the early church was the last part, and that always concluded with the resurrection.

And yet...what our particular Christian scriptures offer us this morning is what our Scriptures offer us in general: exactly what we need, but not necessarily what we want.

What happened? Our reading from the book of *Acts*, as someone described it, is ‘a summary of a sermon which is broken off before its conclusion...[a summary] which God interrupts.’¹ If you look up the story in your Bible you will see that in the very next verse Peter’s conclusion is snatched away from him. ‘While Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word.’²

How true it is that when great things happen to us our words are overtaken by the things we want to explain. The greatest romantic poetry doesn’t come at the first blush of romance, but leaves all who would try to explain

¹ Ben Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), p.355.

² *Acts of the Apostles* 10.44. All biblical quotations, unless noted, are from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

it on the spot tongue-tied and helpless. And there are the deepest experiences of the love of another (a child, a brother, a spouse, a friend, a mother). These are far deeper than first romance. And this love so catches us up that our explanations of these experiences are often abandoned, even as we are beginning to give them words.

What happened? The women had trouble explaining it we're told in the *Gospel of Luke*.

It was the women who had loved Jesus most deeply. It was these women, in particular we're told, that supported Jesus' ministry out of their resources, while the disciples followed Jesus at the head of the line.³ It was the women who stood at the foot of the cross—with John alone—and could not be parted from Jesus as he died. And it was the women who came to the tomb to be with Jesus in his death. The empty tomb, the heavenly messengers, the message of the resurrection to the remaining disciples—it was as both as real and as blurred as the rally of a dying person on his deathbed.

What does our Gospel say? What did the other disciples, huddled nowhere near the empty tomb, hear when the women arrived? '[Their] words seemed to the [apostles] an *idle tale*, and they did not believe them.'

The phrase, an *idle tale*, in the language of the Apostles, was first a Greek medical phrase, used to describe a 'delirium caused by a high fever'. But it was also used metaphorically and sarcastically to dismiss what was considered speculative, pointless chatter.⁴ Do you catch Luke's irony? The Apostles, whose very name means 'the sent ones'—the ones sent with a message—dismiss the message out of hand! Peter, the only one to investigate, is amazed, but is no apostle and sets out nowhere with the news. He goes home. Amazing—but idle talk.

What happened? There is no polish here. The other resurrection accounts have variations.

What happened? Jesus isn't where he is supposed to be—dead and safely entombed. The resurrection is unsettling, it unsettled all the earliest believers. We have as much trouble believing in the resurrection as we do in believing that a Canadian media tycoon will repent of his selfish sins sitting in court in another land. The resurrection isn't so much hard to believe, as it is hard to bear.

³ *Luke 8.2-3*

⁴ Thanks to Joel Green for this linguistic explanation; *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), p.839.

What happened? Sin and death were defeated and this turns everything upside down. And it may do so for us this week, if we don't simply go home. And it should do so for our church this year. It should unsettle us, but it shouldn't leave us troubled forever.

What does the resurrection mean? St. Paul said: 'If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.' It is one thing to say this, and its another to say it in the face of death, as three families heard it said in this parish, at three funeral in the two weeks leading up to Holy Week at St. Paul's.

The question is the same, no matter how young or old the life of the person we mourn. What does the resurrection mean? St. Paul said: 'Since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.'

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead means, above all, that these physical, complicated lives of ours have meaning, eternal meaning, meaning that will never be snuffed out, not by the cruelties inflicted on us (or by us), not even by the shadow of death, or death itself.

This is why we celebrate the liturgy week by week, this is why we take our liturgy out the doors every week into our lives, this is why we feed those, as best we can, who come to us for food. Life is no accident. Every life—*every life*—has eternal meaning. It matters not how desperate, or ugly, or fragile, or pompous. Every life has eternal meaning.

And we are the messengers, with heart, and head and hands of this good news of the Gospel.

We give the last words this morning to our liturgy, the theatre of our faith, especially to its Easter script with the meaning of the resurrection. It is only what we will soon pray: 'Chiefly are we bound to praise thee for the glorious resurrection of thy Son Jesus Christ our Lord...who by his death hath destroyed death, and by his rising to life again hath restored to us everlasting life.'

Amen.