

Easter C: April 17, 2022

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

Easter Day

Isaiah 65: 17-25

Psalm 118

Acts 10: 34-43

John 20: 1-18

### Easter Day

I suppose that amidst all the busyness and celebration of Easter, with flowers and festivities, it would suffice if, for my sermon, I just said, 'Jesus rose, God loves you, be nice, Amen!' And, well, if that is all you really came for, I give you permission to tune out to the remainder of the sermon. However, for the rest of you who know there is more, and continually struggle to a deeper awareness and understanding of the risen Christ who lives in you, I'll ramble on a little longer!

You see, that Jesus rose and that death could not hold him, is perhaps a mystery, but not a surprise for us who have had an encounter with the risen Lord. In years past I have recounted stories of people who have wandered into those 'thin places' as the Celts would say---those places or times where the veil between the two dimensions is thin and we get a glimpse of that other realm. All through history people have had these encounters. We hear of the foundational one this morning with Mary meeting the risen Jesus at the tomb.

In my pastoral ministry people have told me stories of their mysterious contact with the divine or with friends or family who have gone into that other dimension, stories that they would tell few others for fear that people would think them a little whack-o.

And there are many stories from people who have had profound times in prayer or worship where they were overwhelmed by the love of

God and reduced to tears, and something was happening that was other-worldly and hard to describe. Bishop McConnell told just such a story in his sermon on Good Friday. And some will remember a previous sermon where I shared how the language of quantum physics has begun to sound very religious and mystical even while disturbing some of its own scientists-- the concepts of time, distance, and laws of physicality being somewhat fluid at the quantum level! And then there is the mystical path in prayer that nurtures thin places, and wakes us up to that other dimension that is all around us.

You see, the message of the resurrection is not that we will go to heaven some day, but that heaven is all around us now if we can wake up and have eyes to see it! And more than just seeing it or sensing it, we can live into this realm. When Jesus said 'I have come to give you life and that more abundantly', he wasn't kidding. Jesus' whole ministry was not about setting up a religion and providing incantations and belief structures so we can get into heaven, his ministry was to invite us into a practice and way of being that would open the 'kingdom of heaven' now.

And it is also not just about right beliefs, ethical behavior, and working for the poor and for justice because it is the right thing to do. Now don't get me wrong, working for justice and the poor, behaving ethically, having prayers and our beliefs spelled out are not wrong. Good heavens, we Episcopalians can do 'religion' with all its finery very well, and we have lots of prayers and things spelled out quite nicely in our Book of Common Prayer. But all of that is not the end, only a means to the goal, if you will, of a kind of life in Christ that is the source of all that, and the prayers and the finery are only a dim reflection of that life that is shot-through with light and joy.

Now, I hear you saying, What the heck does all that mean? Well, it is hard to say really. It begins in prayer and developing a kind of relationship with God that is constantly opening to the thin places of contact with the Divine. Jesus was always inviting the disciples to awaken to this kind of

life. Remember how he said you must be 'born again', and how confused they got by that. He was, of course, talking about being recreated and awakened to the realm of God – what he called the 'kingdom of God'. And it is important to know that what has commonly been translated as being 'born again', could even better be translated as 'born from above'. In the Christian wisdom tradition we use the language of growing into your true self and letting go of your false self. We have also used the language of dying to self and rising to new life in Christ. St. Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me" (Gal. 2:20); and "For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God." (Col. 3:3).

Last night we did one of those outwardly churchy things with the renewal of our baptismal covenant – lots of words and mumbo-jumbo – ah, but only if you are asleep! But if we listen closely we hear in the rite of baptism the words and symbolism of dying to self as we 'go down' into the waters of baptism, and rising as a new creature in Christ. When we are awake to our baptism we are claiming our mystical union with Christ, and that our true self lives in that new realm with him already. All of our life as Christians is about reminding ourselves of that and bringing about this new realm 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

And this is where we get back to how we interact in this realm. The outgrowth of living this new life in Christ is that, rather than working for justice and being ethical because that is what someone said you are supposed to do as a good Christian, it is because being grounded in this new life, awake to your true self, you cannot help but live and work for justice, the poor, and all that the realm of God is calling you into. It is not about striving to get up to something, rather it comes flooding out of you as easily as water flows downhill! In a sense, all of what I have been saying was summed up by Jesus when he was asked what was the greatest commandment and he replied, "To love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the second is like it, to love your neighbor as yourself." When we love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength we are letting go of the false self and opening to our true self; but notice

that Jesus quickly adds loving neighbor as self. He did not mean for our practice of loving God to become distorted by it being only a kind of personal piety.

Anyone who has truly practiced in the way of Jesus will get what he meant when he said the second is 'like it'. He didn't say it was secondary, or on top of, or extra, he said it was 'like it' – they are connected!

Well, you say, How do I learn to grow more into my true self, how do I follow in this way of Jesus? The only way is through prayer...and all the kinds of prayer: prayerfully reading scripture, intercession, adoration, prayer with others, using the good prayers of our Prayer Book, singing prayer, and most especially, silent prayer or contemplative prayer. As St. John of the Cross said, "The first language of God is silence". Now, don't worry, I know not everyone is called to a life of 'contemplative prayer', per se, but every Christian should be schooled and comfortable with private contemplative prayer as part of their devotional life. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:6, "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door, and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

You may ask, How do I learn about this way of prayer, who will help me? Well, funny you should ask! Most of you know that I consider this one of my most important pastoral duties, if not the most important – to teach and help people with their prayer life, because, as in everything I have just said, I believe it to be the true source of all genuine activity and vocation in our life as Christians and in the life of the parish. And prayer, as witnessed by our own foundational document, The Book of Common Prayer, is a particular hallmark of our life as Episcopalians.

So, next Saturday I am starting a new group to practice contemplative or centering prayer together for 6 weeks at 9 o'clock on Saturday morning, for about half an hour, followed by Morning Prayer.

Again, I'm not saying everyone should be a contemplative, but every Christian should be comfortable with this kind of practice. Practicing together has a tendency to encourage and refine your own prayer practice.

Sitting in silence is not really a hard task as tasks go, but to stay open and yielding and listening to God does provide a real challenge; but also a doorway to a life of your true self, fully awake---where every day, we can dry our tears, look up, and say with Mary, "I have seen the Lord." So, I invite you to join us.

And, as a little foretaste, and has become our custom, let's spend just a moment in silent contemplation before we continue with the Creed. I'll end our silence by ringing a bell.