

You Are Witnesses of These Things

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Lynn C. Sanders, Associate Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, April 22, 2012.
The Third Sunday of Easter.
Based on Luke 24:36b-48.*

Today is Earth Day, and we need the rain. Today is also the Third Sunday of Easter, and we hear one of Luke's accounts of the risen Jesus. Earth Day and Resurrection . . . so much sermon material, so little time.

I don't know what you think of Earth Day, or if you think of it at all. I don't know what you believe about resurrection, or if you think of it at all. But I'd like to be clear about this up front: I'm not going to make a political speech about climate change or global warming, though I think we'd all be wise to pay attention. I'm not planning to expound on the doctrine of the Resurrection. I believe these two things, coming to us as they do by chance at the same time today, can be like two great rivers—say, the Hudson and the East Rivers—that flow together at some point.

Earth Day happens to be dear to my heart because I participated in the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, in my hometown in South Carolina. There is risk in confessing this, because even now you are doing the math. I would like for you to picture me on my tricycle. That first Earth Day marked my own first experience as an environmental activist (and if truth be told, one of my very few activist acts). The kids from my school decided that we would make a statement against both the unbridled consumption of gasoline and its pollution of our air by not taking cars or buses to school; instead, on Earth Day, we would ride our bikes to school, and we would do so in a way that got noticed. A wave of excitement swept us up, all the way from the preparation (i.e. getting our parents' permission, plotting our routes and meeting points, getting our bikes ready) to actually doing the deed.

We got up extra early on the morning of that first Earth Day and jumped on our bikes. Those from my micro-neighborhood met at our designated corner and began riding toward school along the main traffic artery, sharing the busy street uncomfortably but determinedly with cars, trucks, and a few buses. As we traveled we merged with groups of earth-bikers from other micro-neighborhoods. Soon our pedaling mass was large enough to take up the entire busy road, forcing cars to pull off the road or else ride behind us, which they did, honking their horns in frustration. We definitely got attention, even some from the media, and we rode into the school parking lot exhilarated and flushed with our victory!

Two Earth Days later, some of us from that same school borrowed our parents' gardening tools and gloves, grabbed a lot of 50-gallon trash bags, and descended on a downtown "park" along the river that runs through the town.

This "park" was in fact a trash-dumping site, the river was horribly polluted (it often literally smelled to high heaven), and the area was a well-known hangout for drug buying and selling and using. We picked up bags and bags of trash; we raked and shoveled and planted a few things. We made barely a dent in that place. But we went home a really good kind of tired.

Over 20 million people participated in that first Earth Day. Here in New York City on that first Earth Day, Mayor Lindsay shut down Fifth Avenue and over a million people gathered in Central Park—by far the largest gathering in the nation (no surprise to New Yorkers). Earth Day started because one U.S. Senator witnessed the ravages of the 1969 massive oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California.

Consider all that has been done since then, both to use up and to save "this planet Earth, our island home."

Today we hear Luke's account of one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. As Luke tells it, earlier that morning a group of women go to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body but find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. Two angels tell them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." The women run to tell the eleven disciples and all the others, but they are not believed.

Later that same day, Jesus appears and walks with two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, but those two don't recognize him until he eats with them. It is only when the risen Jesus takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, and gives it to them that their eyes are opened and they recognize him. Even though it is night, a very dangerous time to travel, those two get up and dash the seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell the eleven and their companions what they've experienced. There they find that Jesus has also appeared to Peter.

While they are all talking about this—and you can imagine *that* conversation—Jesus appears among them. "Peace be with you." They are startled, terrified; they think they're seeing a ghost. Well, I would be startled and terrified, too—wouldn't you? If Jesus suddenly appeared among us, sitting right here in that seat, I bet that area would clear out in a hurry. Security would be here in a flash.

But how would we know that it was Jesus? Would he look like he does in Renaissance art . . . rather light-skinned, with long dark blond hair and a full beard? Would he have that golden halo around his head? Would he be wearing a long robe and sandals? Or jeans and a t-shirt? Or ragged clothes that needed washing? Or a business suit? How would we recognize Jesus?

What if he came up these steps at communion and received the wafer (wafer?...what happened to the bread?...how did we get here?) and drank the wine from our silver chalice (silver chalice??) and then stopped by the prayer desks before going back to his seat? How would we recognize Jesus?

What if he went to coffee hour and filled out a Welcome card and then got a cup of coffee with half-and-half and two sugars? And brought his coffee to the EXPLORE class, and opened our minds to understand the scriptures, and then our eyes were opened? How would we know it was Jesus? And how in the world would we explain what we had experienced?

None of us can say with any certainty what exactly happened in these post-crucifixion experiences of Jesus, or how they happened. Mark's gospel ends with the women running in terror from the empty tomb, telling no one; there are no resurrection appearances in Mark. Matthew and Luke and John all tell of Jesus' appearing to the disciples and their companions after he was crucified (his crucifixion being historic fact), but all of their accounts differ. The earliest accounts are the least "bodily." The later the accounts were written (i.e., the longer after Jesus died), the more they describe Jesus' physical body: hands, feet, teeth to chew broiled fish.

We say, "On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures" and, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" every time we say the Nicene Creed, as we'll do in just a few minutes. We say, "I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting" every time we say the Apostles' Creed at Morning or Evening Prayer. If we were asked, "What does that mean? What is it you believe about that?" I daresay each of us might give a different answer.

No one asked you what you believed about resurrection when you entered here today, and I don't think anyone is going to quiz you about it during or after the service. You won't be asked to sign any document stating you believe it means x, y or z. Which is not to say "the Episcopal Church is the halfway house to atheism," as one television interviewer stated recently. Our church, for all its faults, is spacious enough and gracious enough to welcome people of all kinds and to welcome their questions—and not only to welcome questions, but to encourage their questioning. Thanks be to God for that!

In the only ways they knew, these early Christians tried to tell those who would come after them that in some way Jesus who had been crucified was still among them in such a way that they *experienced* his presence. They *experienced* something so remarkable and life-changing that it brought them back from fear, out of their locked room, and empowered them to take up the cause and face persecution and martyrdom. Their conviction was so strong that no threat or fear could separate them from the God they believed they had met in Jesus. [*Saving Jesus from the Church*, by Robin R. Meyers, p. 91.]

Roman Catholic priest and sociologist Andrew Greeley puts it this way: "The resurrection is not for the [person] of hope a single event to occur at one point in time. It is a constant progress each day we can die to our fears, our uncertainties, our confusions, our distrusters, our suspicions, and each day we can rise again to openness, confidence, trust, and love."

One of my favorite theologians, Fred Buechner, has this to say about resurrection:

"What really matters is not so much what happened then as what happens now—what happens in your life and my life, what happens in the world, what happens the next five days, the next five years of human history. Is God making [God's] self known in some powerful and saving way among people, even [people] who don't give a hoot about God?"

Jesus' hands and feet may not be present among us, but the ministry of countless hands and feet bears witness to Jesus' (God's) living presence. Jesus "may not appear among us to eat broiled fish, but his presence is tangible in soup kitchens, around the kitchen table, around the altar table ... The most convincing proof of the resurrection is the daily testimony of the faithful that the Christ still lives and his work continues." ["The Gospel of Luke" in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, R. Alan Culpepper, p. 490.]

When do you experience Jesus' (God's) presence? I always feel it in the lightness of laughter—not the laughter of attention-getting humor or laughter at someone else's expense, but in the honest, shared laughter of something genuinely funny—around a supper table, around the copy machine, laughter that draws people closer rather than separates. I experience it in any act of caring for another, in one person helping another, no matter how small the act. I see it in every instance of healing, whether physical or spiritual or emotional. I see it in any act of love for another or for God's creation. I see it as plain as hands and feet any time one person forgives another—or herself.

Those kids who rode their bikes and picked up trash in a small South Carolina city so many years ago—those small acts seemed insignificant. But their *experience* changed some lives. One of those kids grew up to become mayor of that city. Another one founded an environmental management firm, now headquartered one block from that riverside "park." The park is still there, but now the river rushes with clean water; the tangle of underbrush is now landscaped with green lawns and terraces, a stunning architectural bridge, and an outdoor theater. Walking paths, restaurants and an arts center now line the riverbanks. That druggy park has become a center of attraction in what is now a thriving, tree-canopied downtown.

Easter is all around us. We are Easter people. When you experience Easter, it will change your life.

You are witnesses of these things.

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