

Third Sunday of Easter
Fr. James L Walker

4-30-06

When I was in Seminary my senior year, the students who were graduating, of which I was one, got together and were talking about leaving each other. We were students at the General Theological Seminary in Manhattan, New York City, back in the early 70's. We had students in my senior class (there were about 50) from all over the world, mostly from the United States, but we knew when we graduated that those of use who had been living together in great closeness for three years, really close friendships, that we might not see each other again. Some of the ones who would be going to other parts of the world, we wouldn't be seeing as frequently as we had. So we were grieving about the idea of this departure from each other and what we were going to do about our grief as we saw each other to say goodbye. We decided to do what we do best. We decided to do what was the most appropriate and that was to party. We had a big party to celebrate each other because that's what we did best, really!

We decided to have a picnic in Central Park. All of the Seniors over the three years that we were there had accumulated old bicycles which we used to get around in Manhattan. Most people think: "Don't ride a bike in Manhattan." Trust me on this one: It's the *only* way to see Manhattan, its great. So about 40 to 50 of us loaded up that day, mostly Seniors and some of the other people in the classes behind us. We took our picnic baskets up to Central Park, went to one of the rock outcroppings down by the carousel on the south end by Sheeps Meadow. The way we decided that we would celebrate each other and say goodbye was that we would each make a toast to one of the people present and tell a story that celebrated something about them. We did something similar to what grade school kids do on Valentine's Day. The kids put all of the names in the hat, everybody draws a name, and you write a valentine to the person whose name you drew.

We had drawn names, and each person would stand up and say: "I propose a toast to David or Sally and let me tell you this story." We all celebrated something and cheered.

Then it came time for Sharon to do her sharing. Sharon was a woman married to one of the fellow's about to be ordained. She's from Tennessee, good ole southern lady, steel magnolia, famous for her one-liners, her cutting insightful remarks, her beautiful way of telling raucous, scandalous

stories, and she was an incredible prankster. I myself lived in fear of Sharon. I saw her stand up, and I thought: “Oh gosh, if she’s got my name she’s going to tell some horrible story and embarrass me. She stood up and said, “Here’s Whom I want to celebrate. I propose a toast to Jesus of Nazareth in Whose Name we are gathered, for who else but Jesus of Nazareth could have drawn this motley crew together.”

And we were a motley crew. Those of us sitting up there having that picnic, some 33 years ago, included the present Bishop of Pittsburgh, Robert Duncan, who is the leading Bishop in the movement that is thinking about breaking away from the Episcopal Church. Also seated there at that rock was Gene Robinson, the first person elected as an openly gay Bishop in the Episcopal Church. And I was sitting there. There were a lot of things that the three of us and all the rest of us could talk about, and Jesus Christ was and is there. It really was remarkable, people, the gathering of those 50 people from all over the planet who never would have even known that each other existed had it not been for Jesus of Nazareth in Whose Name we had gathered.

Now listen to the stories that are being read here today in the Scripture readings. When we come to church, this is the “preaching to the choir time.” You’re the people who accept or look for meaning in this, but we read these stories and we’ve heard them so many times that they lose their impact. Think about the characters in these stories we read today and the last few weeks. These are people who weren’t just sort of going to church now and then on a Sunday, who sort of thought everybody should have a little religion in their life. No! These people had quit their jobs; had given up their families; and for three years they had risked their lives and being arrested,. They had followed this man on foot in a dusty little miserable country 2000 years ago. Everything they had, everything there were hung on this Jesus of Nazareth and they had just seen *Him* hanging on a cross. Their lives and their careers and their hopes and their dreams had just been smashed to the ground and within three days they had not only been raised back up, but raised back up to greater glory than they had ever dreamed.

These stories tell us about people who are not sitting around like they do in stained glass windows with the light shining out and their hands up in blessing, they’re running around like a bunch of chickens with their heads cut off screaming to each other: “Have you seen Him? He has risen!”

Others are screaming: “No, it’s a ghost”, and others are saying, “We’re hallucinating! We’re loosing our minds! It can’t be true!”

Today we hear people say, “You know the people back then they were suffering a lot of psychological grief and what they meant to say was that this is what they wished had happened or that Jesus “sort of” lives on in their memory. No! Those ancient Christians were asking the same hard questions that skeptics ask today: Are we hallucinating? No we are not! Feel Him, reach out, touch Him, there’s flesh there. It’s risen, glorified flesh, but its real. He takes food and eats it. Ghosts do not eat. The first Christians raised this question and in the end of the story. We read it but we miss it. No! They were not going to believe in a fairy tale. They tested it. And Jesus is real and is truly risen. He’s not somebody we merely talk *about*. He’s somebody we can talk *with* and have relationship with.

In today’s stories, His followers are celebrating this fact. In this story, they’re talking about Jesus and only Jesus. You do not hear one single one of His followers in these Easter stories say: “Well, now that He is risen and He’s no longer with us as He was in His earthly ministry, I know that He would want *me* to be the leader of the group. You know, He always paid more attention to *me*. He always asked *me* to take the minutes at the meetings so I should be in charge.” Nobody is talking about *themselves* because the realize its not all about me, Lee Walker, or you Sally, or you Joe. It’s about our community celebrating the risen Lord Jesus Christ, Who is our Shepherd.

And yet, we have some uneasiness at this point in our congregation about a leadership change that is going on. We’re wondering about continuity, which direction we are going to go, and how things are going to happen. I was telling somebody in the courtyard today that when the letter went out that announced this, I was discussing this with another member of the staff and I said something about “the letter.” Then I kind of laughed and thought “Oh gosh, is that how we’re going to refer to now? As ‘the letter’?”

I remembered when I was working at a church 30 years ago and the rector was leaving. We talked about “the letter” that announced it. Two years later when I left the church, there was “the letter” about me. And this morning when somebody asked me about “the letter”, I thought, which one? You know, rector’s come and go, but Jesus is forever. Wherever the Rector came

from Jesus was there and wherever the Rector goes to Jesus will be there, and Jesus remains with us, this Risen Lord.

However, there's more continuity than that. There's more continuity than we really realize. I would like for everyone on the St. Wilfrid's support staff to stand. I explained earlier today, not everybody knows what we mean by "support staff." That means everybody on staff other than the rector.

There's a phrase in theology: "subsequent to" which is used when we talk about all that is subsequent to God. What we mean is that God is the Creator. Everything else that exists was created by God. Therefore everything created by God is sub-sequent to God. God created the Heavens and the Earth and they are all subsequent to Him. The Rector sets up the support staff and it is subsequent to him. I thought I'd throw in a lot of comparisons about God and Rectors this morning. I thought that would make Harold happy.

So! Could I get the support staff to stand up, that would be I think present today, Patricia, Michael, Cindy who leads our Worship Team. Let's see, who else in here today is support staff? Stand up, Support Staff. Who in here is currently a member of the Vestry? Would you please stand up. Who has ever served on the Vestry here or anywhere, would you please stand up. Are there any members of the Altar Guild here? Could I have our Acolytes stand. And if they're not already standing, could I have the Ushers stand. LEM's, or LEV's our Lector's, our Intecessors, if you're one of those please stand up. Small Group Leaders, I didn't mentioned them earlier, but they're one of my favorite ministries. Flower Guild, Life in the Lamb, Wisdom. Alright, I could go on and on, and my apologies if I left out any one group, my point is, we normally come in here and we sit and we look up here and we see the Clergy and we forget all the Ministry's that are going on all around us and if you weren't standing up, don't feel embarrassed, just feel like you're missing something that you can be part of too by being part of one of these ministries.

People, the Resurrection is real. Go back and read these stories that were happening 2000 years ago. They are about people who were lifting things up in the middle of having their world turned upside down, yet, they're not in chaos. That's because they're saying to each other: "Our focus wherever we may be, will be on Christ, because Christ is at the center, and when we are looking at Him we are all looking in a circle together at each other." I'm

going to spend the next 6 weeks until June 11th, celebrating things. I said this morning and he hated it when I said it: but I said: “No! I didn’t come to this church because of Harold. I came here because when I visited this church for my interview, I saw Christ here. And, to Harold’s credit, I’ve been in churches where the clergy try to use Jesus to manipulate the People or they try to obscure Jesus or do a makeover of Him. Harold didn’t. Harold came in here and said: To the best of my ability, I want to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.” And I said: “I want to work in a place like that.” What has been planted here will not wither it will grow, so I want you to join me in these next few weeks and think about:

- What are the things that we had before Harold came that we want to continue
- What has Harold planted here and what new can come in the future

I want to celebrate and be really excited about the fact that Harold has passed this way and touched this place in a beautiful way. Now I want to celebrate all that is good about it. I’m really excited about all the fun we are going to have in the years to come, making beautiful things grow here in the Name of our Risen Lord.