

Easter Day – The Sunday of the Resurrection
Pastor Michael D. Archer

4-8-07

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalms 118

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Congregation responds, “The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!”) As Father Lee mentioned at the beginning of this Service, the resurrection is one of the cardinal tenets of the Christian faith. We are here today to celebrate the risen Christ and to seek further understanding of just what this resurrection means for *us* as we carry forth His name into our world. Since in the Episcopal Church every Sunday is a feast of Jesus Christ, we commemorate the resurrection every Sunday... but just what is resurrection all about and why is it so important for us?

Our readings this morning help us to answer that question at least in part. The Isaiah passage from the Old Testament includes, “*Thus says the Lord God, I’m about to create a new heaven and a new earth. The former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.*” He speaks not of a restoration of things to the state that they had previously been, but a *new* heaven and a *new* earth that would cause Israel *to forget entirely* the former heaven and the former earth.

Remember the context of Isaiah’s prophecy. He has foretold a time when the city of Jerusalem would be laid waste, the temple would be destroyed, and the people of Israel would be exiled. Yet Isaiah wants to convey a sense of hope even in the shadow of destruction. God was not going to leave them at that place of exile. God was not going to leave the temple in destruction, but in fact there would be a new Jerusalem... and this new Jerusalem would be of even greater significance than the former Jerusalem.

The prophet Haggai would later say of the new temple under construction in Jerusalem, “*I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty... ‘The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,’ says the Lord Almighty. ‘And in this place I will grant peace,’ declares the Lord Almighty*” (Haggai 2:7b, 9). If you will, this would not be a *restored* Jerusalem, but a *resurrected* Jerusalem.

Similarly, the resurrection of Jesus was not his being brought *back to life*, as though to continue living as he had lived previously. Resurrection was not restoration. Resurrection was a new birth, a new life. When Jesus first appeared to Mary after the tomb had been found empty – she saw Jesus but she didn’t recognize him. When she finally does recognize him, Jesus says, “*Don’t touch me, don’t hold on to me, I’ve not yet returned to my Father.*” There was something different about Jesus. This was not the same man she had seen on the cross, this was a man raised to new life. Not restoration... resurrection.

For the first ten years of my ordained ministry I was the Senior Pastor of the Church of the Nazarene in Payson, Arizona. Among the wonderful people who attended the church was an amazing couple, Paul and Shirley. Shirley was the church pianist, and Paul (truly the best friend

a pastor could ever have) served on the Church Board. They had been high school sweethearts, and their subsequent marriage continues to be an inspiration to all who know them.

While they were dating, Paul drove a 1932 Studebaker. If I remember the story correctly, they drove the Studebaker after they were married until money got to be a little tight or the car no longer met their needs, at which time Paul sold the car. Some years later, he bought it back thinking that he was going to restore the Studebaker. For some reason the restoration was not completed and he sold the car a second time. Some time later Paul's business began to take off. In his mind, Paul kept going back to that 1932 Studebaker as a symbol of the love he shared with Shirley... and he set out to find it again, ultimately buying the same car a third time. How many of you keep track of where the cars that you've sold have gone? Most of us sell cars hoping we never see them again!

Paul bought the Studebaker, this time deciding *not* to restore it, but to *resurrect* it. Out came the stock engine... in went a *Corvette* engine. The rumble seat became a power rumble seat. Leather seats, air conditioning, primo sound system, cruise control (with a Corvette engine, more like automatic pilot!), chrome everywhere, candy apple red... it was an incredibly beautiful automobile. Truly, it was a work of automotive art.

Paul's brother, I'm told, was somewhat upset that hadn't restored it to its original condition, but Paul had more in mind than a restoration. Instead he had resurrected it, giving it a new life that far exceeded its old life. In fact, it was such a spectacular car he entered it in the International Studebaker Competition in Las Vegas and won not only the best of the class for the street rod, but he won best of the best in all classes. The license plate, a personalized Arizona plate, said all that was necessary... "*Born Again.*" I know that's not a phrase we often use in the Episcopal Church, but to be born again really is to be resurrected, its new life... and this vehicle had new life.

Now Paul did all of this for a reason. He wanted that vehicle to celebrate the relationship that he and Shirley had built over the years. Once the car was exactly the way he wanted it to be, they set off on a journey. He wanted to take that 1932 Studebaker with his wife of now more than 50 years across the country, driving that car in every one of the 50 United States. Now you're thinking, "Every state?" Yes! They put the Studebaker on a ship, sent it to Hawaii and drove around the island there. They shipped it to Alaska and drove it around Alaska. All 50 states! In their home they have pictures of them with this Studebaker in front of the state sign in every state in the Union. This car celebrates a relationship but it also embodies a mission, sharing that love and the new life love makes possible everywhere it goes.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ did not restore what had previously been, it ushered in something new. When Jesus spoke to his Disciples about his return to his heavenly Father, he said: "*I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do greater things than these, because I am going to the Father... Unless I go away, the Counselor (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you*" (*John 14:12, 16:7b*). The introduction of the Holy Spirit into the lives of men and women is the power by which God is creating a new heaven and a new earth. The power of resurrection, according to the Apostle Paul, is at work within us giving life to our "mortal bodies" (*Romans 8:11*). This

new life empowered by the Holy Spirit is given not to fulfill all of the wishes and dreams that we bring to this life. This power is given to complete the mission for which Jesus was sent to this world in the beginning... to celebrate relationship between God and human kind and to usher in a new heaven and a new earth.

So, let me warn you. If this same power that raised Jesus Christ from the dead is at work within you and you have been resurrected with Christ, you are here to carry forward the mission of Christ. If that same spirit is at work within you... if you take the presence of that spirit seriously and you take the fulfillment of that mission seriously... God's call may take you places and allow you to touch the lives of people you never imagined. Your life is truly not your own once you understand you are here to carry on the mission of Christ. From time to time, God has a way of reminding me of that fact.

Before accepting the call to become the Senior Pastor in Payson, Arizona, I spent a couple of years in Prescott, Arizona as a Youth Pastor. Carrie, a knobby-kneed 8th grade volleyball player upon my arrival in Prescott, was an active member of the church youth group. She and her family became very close to my family, staying in touch long after we left Prescott.

In the mail some years later, I received a reminder of just how old I was getting. Do you get those reminders on occasion? It was an announcement of Carrie's graduation from the University of Missouri at Kansas City. That knobby-kneed Junior High student was now graduating from college. I couldn't believe how quickly time had passed! Because this family had been very special to my family, I decided to surprise them and just show up unannounced at Carrie's graduation in Kansas City. So I bought an airline ticket from Phoenix to Kansas City, about \$200 at that time, timing everything so that I would arrive in Kansas City a couple of hours before the graduation, drive to the University of Missouri Kansas City, and be there to surprise them. I was excited! I love surprising people.

I boarded a plane at Sky Harbor Airport in Phoenix early in the morning and landed a couple of hours later in Denver, where I was to connect on to Kansas City. I got off the plane in Denver, made my way to the gate where the connecting flight was scheduled to depart, only to discover that the flight had been cancelled! A sign was posted reading, "See Customer Service Representative at Gate B2."

"Great! What now?" I thought.

I made my way to Gate B2, where what looked to be 250 people were in the line. It was a *very* long line. As it was still relatively early, I told myself that there was still plenty of time to make another flight and not to panic. I finally arrived at the front of the line only to discover that some 100 flights had been cancelled all over the United States, due to bad weather in Chicago. The best they could do was to get me out the *next morning* to Kansas City.

I thought, *"What's the point of that? The graduation is tonight. Tomorrow morning will be too late!"* The only alternative arrangement was to fly standby on a flight back to Phoenix... a flight not scheduled to leave for another three hours. Three hours wandering the terminal in Denver, disappointed, frustrated, and angry with God. *"You know, God, I just wanted to do something*

nice. Carrie and her family mean a lot to me and they don't even know was coming. The surprise is ruined and I've wasted an entire day in the Denver airport!"

Three moping hours later, I boarded the flight going back to Phoenix. This was before 9-11-2001 obviously, when flights were frequently not full. I found my seat towards the back of the plane grumbling under my breath, *"This day is a waste, God. Could you do just one thing for me today and let no one sit next to me? Just let me be by myself and keep grumbling."*

The plane starts to fill, and wouldn't you know it, the last person who gets on the plane makes his way all the way back to the back and plops himself down next to me. I'm thinking, *"Great! Thanks a lot, Lord. I'm just going to be quiet... maybe try to sleep."* Well, this guy was in a talkative

"Are you from Denver?" he asked.

"No, I'm not from Denver... Arizona."

"Oh, where in Arizona?"

"Payson."

"Oh, where is that?"

"North of Phoenix in the mountains."

"That's nice. What do you do there?"

"Great," I think to myself, "Now I have to pretend I'm not grumpy anymore." I respond to him, *"I'm a Pastor."* Now that my profession of service to others is out there I feel obligated to reciprocate. Reluctantly I asked him, *"Is Phoenix home for you?"*

"No," he said, "I'm from New York."

"Oh, well what takes you to Phoenix, business?"

"No," he answers, "I'm going to see my father." Then he added, "I haven't seen my father in almost 30 years. We had a real falling out a number of years ago. I got into drugs and the family pretty much wrote me off. I got word through one of my sister's last week that my dad has cancer. They don't know I'm coming, but I'm going to show up at the house and just see if dad will talk with me after all these years."

At that point my heart felt guilty for my attitude toward God. I thought I was going to Kansas City, but God had other plans. God might not have caused the cancellation of my flight to Kansas City, but He was going to use me there on that unexpected flight back to Phoenix. I began to tell this man the story of the Prodigal Son who had wandered away from his father... that when he came home, the father was looking for him from a great distance and when he saw

him, ran out and put his arms around his and hugged him and kissed him and celebrated that his son who was dead was alive again. I prayed with him that he would receive a similar reception when he returned home to his father. Then we prayed together for God's healing touch to be upon his father.

I never heard from that man again. I don't know if he saw his father or what that reception was like. But I got off the plane in Phoenix and drove the two hours back to Payson realizing that my life is not my own. As one who has accepted the call to be an ambassador for Jesus Christ... as one who has been the recipient of the same spirit that raised Jesus Christ from the dead... I'm about fulfilling his mission in the world to create a new heaven and a new earth one life at a time. The plans for how that happens are certainly not mine. The plans are God's. But every step of the way that spirit will be with me and that spirit will be with you as well.

If the same spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in your life... if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is personal to you... the mission that was Christ's mission is yours today, and you have the privilege of being part of the formation of a new heaven and a new earth.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! (Congregation responds, "The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!")

Are you?