

Eastertide! What a wonderful season. For the Church, it's about resurrection: of Jesus' and ours if we but accept God's gift of redemption. The Eastertide gospel stories record how the disciples of Jesus overcame their confusion, disbelief, and fear to become the Apostles of Christ. All 4 gospels contain empty tomb stories. The gospel of John contains the Doubting Thomas story, while the post-resurrection stories, the Road to Emmaus & today's gospel appear in Luke.

Typically, we hear a gospel story a week. With the Easter stories, it's easy to assume the events occurred over time. They didn't. Read together in one sitting, one grasps that these events perhaps occurred over a 12-hour period. If true, consider this in light of today's gospel: the last meal Jesus had was on a Thursday night. He undoubtedly didn't eat anything on Friday & certainly nothing on Saturday. Sunday was packed with appearances: at the tomb, in the locked upper-room & the journey to Emmaus. So by the time Jesus showed up on the beach, he was probably famished, wouldn't you think?

Now Luke, who tells the story, was a practical, analytical, & trained physician. A no nonsense guy, kind of like the old TV cop, Joe Friday, of Dragnet fame who always said, "Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts." Luke's story is matter-of-fact, tell-it-like-it-was story of Jesus.

So, we're on the beach: the disciples are still terrified, confused, & have no idea what's happening to them. They don't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Nobody does! When a person dies, they're dead. Period! So what exactly, have they been seeing? Surely, a disembodied ghost - a non-material spirit, however benign. Suddenly, an un-photoshopped Jesus with

holes in his hands, feet & chest appears out of nowhere and tells his disciples to touch him, to put their fingers in his wounds & then asks them for something to eat! Now, we've all heard ghost stories - maybe told a few ourselves? But in any of these stories, have you ever heard of ghosts being touched? Of ghosts having flesh and bones? Of ghosts eating? I haven't.

The disciples give Jesus some broiled fish. He takes it & it's gone, lickedly-split, with no tartar sauce mind you. Amazingly, **Jesus eats it**. Oh BOY! If Jesus isn't a ghost, then what IS he? They knew he'd died, so what was he doing with a body as real as theirs? What did this mean & how were they supposed to process this information?

It took them the full 50-days of Eastertide, & then some, to understand that resurrection is not a restoration of biological life as is resuscitation, but rather a metamorphose, a transformation, a transmutation from mortality to immortality.

Does it matter whether the resurrected Christ had a physical body or not? Yes it does because Jesus' resurrected body gives us a glimpse of what **our lives** will be in eternity. You see, the promise of the New Testament is that, like Jesus, **we too** will be resurrected from the dead, body & soul together, whole people, not disembodied spirits.

Luke pounds the point home. Who cares if you were there to witness it or not? Without embellishment Luke says it happened, even though no one knows **how** it happened. From Luke's perspective, Jesus of Nazareth blew onto the scene. He did this & that, with power & presence. He said this & that, with grace & love. And it built up & up, following the great prophecies of the ages. Then he was crucified, died and was buried. And now? He is eating fish.

All these stories written so that you and I can believe. That is their primary message. Even so, there are subsidiary lessons in each story. In today's story, one of the subsidiary lessons is that Jesus came back with a body, suggesting that bodies count to God! Even dead bodies, whether physical, spiritual, or both. You see, you & I can't become carriers of resurrection, contagious with forgiveness without having a body. In essence, Jesus' bodily resurrection threatened his disciples, and threatens us, with life! Peter got it. In being a witness to Jesus alive again, Peter knew there was power to heal that disabled man who begged at the gate of the Temple. Peter had no coins to put in his cup, but by the power of Jesus, the resurrected, Peter pulled him up, and off the beggar went, dancing. Not amused, the authorities hauled Peter off to court where he talked about this Jesus back from the dead with a body. Straight-talking Peter was positively contagious with resurrection, all because the first one had come back alive from the whipping, the cross, and the grave.

God makes bodies, sustains them, and resurrects them. For God, they are holy, whether the body of Jesus, or yours, or mine. To God, all bodies are natural, spiritual, & sacramental. Thus, Jesus shows up, complete with body, there in the Upper Room, here on our altar, as his Church. And Jesus shows up somehow - not as a ghost, but as a body - in the sick, the poor, the hungry & still asks us that question: "Have you anything here to eat?" He shows up, not as a ghost, but in the bodies of the addict, the prostitute, the crime victim, the soldier or civilian killed in war. The world, & we, may threaten him with death, but he threatens us with life.

Luke tells this story for another reason: to counter Gnosticism which was widespread before and after the Resurrection. Without going into detail,

Gnosticism embraced Platonic dualism believing that matter is evil and that knowledge is more important than faith. In Christianity, this got converted to matter is bad, spirit is good. Though declared a heresy by the Church Fathers, Gnosticism remains alive and well today, most notably in Protestant denominations.

But the primary message of all these eye witness accounts is so that we **might believe** and, in turn, become witnesses ourselves - to put our own bodies on the line - wounded, scared, & wrinkled though they may be - bodies contagious with forgiveness that witness to resurrection, threatening the world with life. This is important because the only Easter some people may ever see is the Easter they see in us.

But this is easier said than done, isn't it? We Episcopalians are so reserved, so polite, so very quiet about faith - it's so private, you know. That's why one of the abiding themes of our new bishop DeDe is "Tell your story" - Your faith journey - Your encounters with our Living God. At Convention she asked:

"How many times do you hear people say, 'Well what would happen if we all went out those doors and in authentic, real, helpful ways, talked about our love of God?' . . . that isn't happening, is it? But what would happen [if we did]? . . . If every one of you went to your place and talked about your love of Jesus. Just shared your story. It would transform Central New York. It would transform this diocese. It's our stories that are the place of encounter with Jesus. The gospelers don't tell you a whole bunch of, 'Well, you should really be doing this.' The gospelers tell us the story."

Today, though, few *people talk* about their spiritual stories, their encounters with God. Bishop DeDe believes this has been more or less so since the beginning of the scientific age, the age which increasingly defines Truth as

only that which can be proven or scientifically duplicated. All else, by definition must, then, be FALSE or mythical. Consequently, fewer & fewer wish to explore the possibility of more than a singular Truth. Is it any wonder people of faith hold their encounter stories close to their chest?

Most people develop a love of Jesus through an encounter experience, an AWESOME moment in their lives, when they knew in their heart & mind, in the very nerve ending of their hands & feet, that God was doing something, right then, right there before their eyes & in their ears. An awesome, but fleeting, moment which let them see things in a different way, from a little different perspective - giving them the opportunity to change direction [a chance to be transformed].

Such moments might be as simple as getting away from the clutter & static of modern life, tending your garden, wiping away a child's tears. It might be a mother in a hospital room suddenly filled with a sense of peace & well-being after asking the Lord to restore her 18-year-old boy's sight whose face had an encounter with an exploding homemade cannon. It might be the words of a hymn, a sudden, fleeting glimpse of the One whom you're worshipping or the sensation of peace & wellbeing as your senses soak up the leaves dripping with color as if freshly painted. At times like these, I think of St. Julian of Norwich who said while the Black Plague raged through Europe "All is well and all shall remain well."

We all need encouragement if we're to have & maintain a dynamic & confident faith, some strengthening, some experience of the Holy, some experience of the power of God & of the other world, the other side of reality as it were in order

- to see as well as to believe

- to experience as well to hope
- to know as well as to have faith

Such experiences help bring all these things into focus.

St. James', along with a number of other parishes, is participating in the Diocesan effort to help us become better witnesses. Your God-Sightings program, as I understand it, is the first of several steps to help you find God's presence in your everyday life - the stuff that'll form the basis of your personal faith journey.

If you haven't already, join St. James' God-Sightings program & hear firsthand accounts of other peoples' sightings. You'll finish the program knowing, unequivocally, that God is **indeed** everywhere, all the time, for everyone. Then one day, allow yourself to step out of your comfort zone & share your story with a trusted friend. This is witnessing. DeDe says, "...tell your story. Tell your story & what God has done in you. Tell your story and how the love of God has transformed you. The story is enough. Because the story is really the place where we've encountered Jesus."

As the Benedictine nun Joan Chittister writes,

"Resurrection testifies to the metamorphosis of the Jesus of history to the Christ of faith. It is about the shift in people's perception of the Jesus of first-century Nazareth to the Christ who galvanizes all time. It is about the Incarnation of the Jesus born in Bethlehem to the Jesus born in us. It designates the transformation of Jesus who rises from the dead in Jerusalem to the Jesus who rises, if we allow it, in us. The Resurrection of Jesus is about coming to grips with the transformed and transforming presence of Christ then, now, and always. Once that happens, life is never again the same. Life begins anew." Amen

P.S. It is my great hope that such sharing might help reduce the divisions & issues that divide our country; where neighbor willingly **listens** to the neighbor who sees things differently & civilly discusses issues without flinging about derogatory labels. Our great country needs this. The world needs this. Let's become Carriers of Resurrection!