

Br. Simon's Homily for Easter Day, Year A
Preached at Church of the Epiphany, Lincoln Heights
4/24/2011

(Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18)

When I lived in New York City back in the mid-90's I was a member of the Church of St. Luke in the Fields in Greenwich Village. The style of liturgy there is what is commonly called "high Church" – incense every Sunday, sanctuary bells at the elevation, and chanting throughout the service. The liturgy there is beautiful and, generally, very well rehearsed. If you're ever in New York on a Sunday I highly encourage you to go and take in the show.

One Sunday during the procession at the beginning of the Mass we had a new thurifer who had just been trained, and he got a little ahead of himself. Usually, you take the thurible and swing it back and forth as you process, but you may have seen that sometimes thurifers will swing it around in a big, dramatic circle. Well this thurifer tried to do that, but he got nervous midway through the circle and lost his focus, and then we all watched in horror as a chunk of burning charcoal came flying out and, luckily, landed in the middle of the aisle and not on someone's head. Of course the full procession was coming behind him and he didn't have time to deal with it, so he kept processing. And everyone behind him got to that point in the aisle, stopped and looked down at the smoking charcoal, then walked around it. Finally, after everyone had gone by, the verger came back around to stamp out the still-smoldering charcoal and sweep up the embers.

At Coffee Hour after the Mass an acquaintance there was complaining about this incident. He said in all seriousness, "that was SO distracting – how am I supposed to experience the Divine in the face of the unexpected?!" I had to laugh when he said it. First of all because the incident in question happened very early in the service and didn't really impact the rest of the Mass and, thankfully, no damage was done. And second because so often that is EXACTLY how we experience the Divine.

I am really struck in today's Gospel reading by everyone's reaction. Despite the fact that Jesus repeatedly told his disciples what would happen on the third day after his death, they couldn't quite believe it was true. I mean, it is a pretty

incredible thing. And I guess that after witnessing the betrayal by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane, then seeing Jesus be crucified, and being present with him as he took his last breath, and watching them take his lifeless body down from the cross and wrap it in linens and lay it in a tomb, and then because of ritual law sitting alone in their grief and misery on the Sabbath day, it would be difficult to expect to see anything other than what usually happens with dead people.

And so we have in today's Gospel Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and the other disciple "whom Jesus loved" running frantically back and forth to see what's happened and to try to make sense of this unexpected turn of events. In a program I saw last week on the Discovery Channel called "Who Is Jesus?" three theologians traveled through Israel to discover the historical Jesus. One theologian said that the empty tomb is a problem because archaeology and science fall short in trying to explain it, and so an element of faith has to take over to make sense of what happened.

Notice how Mary doesn't even recognize Jesus at first. She is so wrapped up in her grief and desperate to get the facts of what happened that she completely misses the truth of the Resurrection. Until Jesus finally says her name, and he opens her eyes to the truth of their personal relationship.

We are like Mary and the disciples in this story: an Easter people full of hope and joy, and who are forgiven and loved beyond any way that we can understand love, but who also live in a very earthly, human world that is full of temptation, greed, sin, disappointment, grief, and unexpected tragedies. Just like with Mary and the disciples, and my friend at St. Luke's in New York, this very human condition often blinds us to the truth of Resurrection joy.

So our job in the midst of the hustle and bustle and distraction of life is to keep straining to hear Jesus' voice in the people and situations of our lives; Jesus calling our name and inviting us into a personal relationship with him. And believe me, even though you may not hear him, he IS calling. He IS here. Jesus promised that he would be with us even to the end of the ages. And Jesus keeps his promises. Just look in the empty tomb.

The good news of the Resurrection is that the power of sin and death has been broken, and so there is nothing to fear. And this was done for you because you are loved, beyond measure, just as you are right now. So today, and every day, when you hear his voice calling you by name in the face of the unexpected,

believe in the truth of the Resurrection, give thanks, rejoice, and let your joy be known to others.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!