



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Easter Changes Everything

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

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Do you suppose that Jesus got a kick out of startling his disciples? It sounds like it to me in the beginning of the Gospel from Luke that we just heard. Today's reading comes right after the wonderful road to Emmaus story in which Jesus becomes known in the breaking of the bread. These two followers of Jesus (not members of the original 12) hurry back Jerusalem and share their amazing experience. By this time, Jesus has apparently also been seen by Peter. Everyone is talking all at once and suddenly Jesus materializes in their midst. They are understandably startled - can't you just hear it - "Jesus! stop doing that!" They think he's a ghost, but this is a ghost that eats dinner with them. How do they make sense of this?

At first it was probably all seen as something great that happened to Jesus, "He is risen, Happy Easter!" but at some point, an uncomfortable reality begins to dawn. Jesus' resurrection changes everything that they know and understand - it's an existential reset button. The disciples and all of the other followers have no choice but to begin to live into this changed reality.

The only experience that I can call up that is at all similar is becoming a parent. My apologies to those of you for whom this metaphor may feel exclusive - but I've just spent three days helping to take care of my 2 year old grandson so it's on my mind. When you have a baby it's an amazing event, with helpful nurses, appropriately adoring family, and the glow of new life in your midst. So cute and perfect. And then you come home and anything that was neatly arranged in your house, your life or your mind is suddenly obsolete. Everything has changed. Your life does not belong to you anymore. Your vocabulary and the ability to speak in refined sentences is hijacked. This tiny tyrant is the focus and master of everything. You have nobly died to self, although mostly through lack of sleep. Nothing will ever be the same.

What does the process of dawning awareness look like for followers of Jesus? What has changed? Well, for starters, our understanding of life and death. In Jesus' experience, life apparently never ends and death is an event, not a state or condition. That's pretty big, takes a while to sort out what that means. Jesus' resurrection changes the definition of power. Human politics and culture with their use of violence, oppression and division have been shown to be ultimately ineffective because self-sacrificing love has had the last word and that word is Easter. All that humankind has identified as important and real, success, comfort, wealth, status have all been trumped by simplicity and community. Giving and doing something for someone else is what leads to this newly defined life and success. It is the path to joy and fulfillment.

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Keep in mind that this begins to dawn on Jesus' followers as they are hiding away in the upper room. They must have started to feel a bit small and uncomfortable in their fear as the one who conquered fear stood before them. That is probably the biggest reframing of human thought in the history of human thought. The angels who announced Jesus' birth said it right away - do not be afraid. Jesus told his disciples, "do not be afraid" and then he proves to them why fear is no longer necessary. That primal impulse toward self-preservation, which certainly has its uses, is still present in us but we are now invited into a way of life that puts love and self-giving ahead of the fear response. This was a huge shift in consciousness for Jesus' followers, not that they would have called it that. It is one that we still struggle with today. The disciples were afraid but that changed and they became fearless as they shared this new understanding of the power of love.

Jesus' surprising appearance in the upper room showed that the human lust for power and control through violence is of absolutely no importance in the cosmic scheme of things. They crucified him but they couldn't get rid of him. No king has ever had so many followers, no teacher has ever taught so much. What Jesus is and teaches us is eternity - the life of the Eternal - the intent of the Eternal Mind and Heart. It can be disconcerting to begin to understand that so much of what that human history has pursued and celebrated, the empires and monuments, nations and cultures do not interest God. What interests God is love and equality, compassion and joy.

The other thing that has changed is the consequences of the crucifixion - the horrific execution of an innocent. According to every formula, Biblical and Hollywood, the victim can now have his revenge. From the moment that Peter heard from the women that Jesus was alive, he must have been in agony, knowing that he had betrayed the love and trust that Jesus had given him. He had denied that he even knew him and completely abandoned him. What would Jesus want now? What would Jesus want from the Temple authorities and the politicians? If he could overcome what had happened to him, he could do anything - exact any punishment that he felt was deserved.

And yet, what he said on the cross continues - "Father forgive them" and he in last week's reading he tells them learn to forgive, "if you forgive the sins of any the sins of any they are forgiven, if you retain them, they are retained." This is very new territory - he stands before them with the wounds that had been carved into his body and he forgives. The ability to let go of grievances and the memories of betrayal, hurts and disappointments is at the heart of the resurrection. He died forgiving and he rose forgiving. Imagine if humanity started to get that. There would be no blood feuds, no wars because of some event in the distant past. Please don't hear this as saying that wrong behavior should not be addressed, stopped and corrected - it should. When someone commits a crime, there are just ramifications. The forgiveness part is necessary for those who have been harmed. It is in their best interest to forgive. I heard a great way of putting this the other day. Holding on to your anger is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to get sick. Forgiveness is putting down the poison. Jesus stood in the midst of his amazed disciples without a hint of resentment or desire for revenge.

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So you can see what this surprising reappearance of Jesus among the living begins to mean for those he will send out to continue his ministry on earth. His resurrection has overcome the worst that human culture has to dish out; he has opened our eyes to the greater reality in which we live. He has shown that fearful worry about pretty much anything is a waste of time. The time that we are given is better spent creating love, joy and peace in the world. And he has brought radical forgiveness into human life. All of these are to be the marks of his disciples.

Those in the upper room eventually overcame their fear and began to move about the world creating communities based on these changes. It's a hard thing to begin, it's even harder to maintain. I don't know that such growth in the human heart and mind is possible without regular engagement with faith. To create and maintain communities committed to compassion, justice and love takes lots of people working together - that's the reason for the church - constantly lifting up those who fall down, encouraging those who become dispirited, practicing forgiveness together, celebrating the triumphs and constantly seeking those whom God would have us find or welcome into our midst and always sharing the astonishing things that Jesus changed when he suddenly appeared in their midst and said "Peace be with you."

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