

Isaiah 25:6-9
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
John 20:1-18

He is risen!! Jesus is alive!!

Now.....what do we say after that? For two thousand years, more eloquent theologians than me have been proclaiming this good news...and it's been done in every way imaginable. So what's new? What's to be said now that hasn't been said before? Probably nothing, but the news that he has risen is still big news...even two thousand years after the fact! And that alone makes it special.

Every year at this time I think back to a very fond Grandmommy memory I have. My daughter and her family were living in Hoboken, New Jersey. The boys were about 4 and 5. The four year old, Julián, called me...dying to tell me what he had just seen. Hoboken is a heavily Catholic community with strong roots in Europe, so they take the Easter season quite seriously. Julián called me...very excited...to tell me about a parade he had just seen. It seems that a man dressed in a white robe...Jesus he guessed...had carried a cross all the way through Hoboken with lots of people dressed in black walking with him. All of them were somber. Julián was all breathless telling me the finale...and then they killed him! Yes, Julián they did. They killed him. And do you know what happened three days later? No, Grandmommy. What happened? He was alive again!! Dead silence. Even without Facetime, I could see the wheels turning in that little head!!! WOW!! Yes, Julián, WOW, indeed!! He was aghast and even as we hung up, I knew that he was still trying to wrap his little brain around this whole idea.

Julián is not alone. All of us struggle to wrap our brains around this whole idea! He's alive again!! Perhaps it helps to be able to embrace this whole notion with the wonder and faith of a child...for such are those who enter the Kingdom of Heaven.

While Jesus being raised from the dead is a spectacular victory, it's not the most important part of the story. An atheist friend of mine asked me one time why Jesus' death had to be so gruesome. Why did he have to suffer so much? Couldn't he just have gotten sick and died and then come back to life? Or had an accident and been revived? Or just died in his sleep? No, I thought. It had to be the way it was. You see, Jesus' death and all the events that surrounded it amounted to a galactic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Jesus has volunteered from the beginning to do battle with the forces of evil. The only way his victory could be seen would be if he managed to prevail in the face of anything and everything that evil forces could throw at him...all the evil that we know to be in the world...and it was...monumental injustice, jealousy, betrayal, lying, cowardice, bullying, physical torture, public humiliation, psychological warfare, spiritual collapse and execution. As strong and

formidable as Jesus was and although he was God's Son, even he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus absorbed it all...every bit of human evil that could be brought to bear. That's why he couldn't die in his sleep. He had to do battle first in order for this victory to have real meaning. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was in complete victory over all those forces that still prowl in the world today. We need only to remember that God always wins in the end! And if God isn't winning, then it's not yet the end!

While resurrection is a spectacular event, it wasn't unheard of, even in Jesus' day. I'm sure you remember that Lazarus was raised from the dead, but we don't worship Lazarus. And there are many myths and legends about resurrections through the ages. They still occur today in what we call 'near death' experiences. Sometimes we can explain how this might have happened or what it was, but sometimes we can't. However, we are always fascinated to hear what someone remembers about a 'near death' experience. It seems almost always to involve bright light, sometimes a tunnel leading into bright light and a sense of euphoria and well-being so powerful that most people report being disappointed when they awoke and realized that they were still in this life. They didn't want to come back!!

That's what makes Jesus' resurrection so special. It was a victory over evil and death that God raised him from the dead, but the more important victory rests in why he came back. He paved the way for us to be reconciled to God and then He came back for us! He came back to get us. He came back to be with us. He came back to embrace us and keep us with him always. That's what's so special. On the day between the crucifixion and Easter morning, on Holy Saturday, Jesus came back to those already dead to bring them home and then on Easter morning he came back to the living to bring us home. That was the Great Truth...the Real Victory...in his resurrection. He came back to get us.

And when he rose again, he made a number of appearances. He appeared to Mary in the garden by the tomb, but she didn't recognize him until he said her name. She wasn't expecting to see him!! St. Paul tells us in the letter to the Corinthians that we just heard this morning that Jesus appeared to Cephas and then to the twelve disciples who were still eleven at that time since Judas had been lost to them. And then, Paul says, he appeared to more than 500 hundred people. That's a pretty big crowd...too big a crowd for this to have been a group hallucination! And then he appeared to James and then to all the apostles. And much later, he appeared to Paul, a persecutor of the church. He appeared to different people at different times and in different places. It's kind of hard to get group think going under those circumstances.

Have you ever wondered why the risen Jesus didn't just stride into the Roman palace in Jerusalem and present himself to Pontius Pilate? Wouldn't that have felt good? Well, you were right the first time, Pilate. I wasn't guilty of anything and you executed me anyway. Shame on you. And he could have gone to Annas and Caiaphas and confronted them in the same way. You no good scoundrels! You sent me to be executed just because of your fear and jealousy. You blew it! Big mistake. He could even have gone to Rome to confront Caesar with a warning that he'd better lay off these upcoming Christians. Vindication is just so delicious. But that wasn't Jesus' mission and he didn't do it!

Instead he appeared to ordinary people. He did go to people who had betrayed and denied him, but not to the powerful people. He went to the people he wanted. He went to people who didn't deserve it...people just like you and me. And Easter keeps happening. He keeps coming to us...ready or not!

So many times Jesus shows up when we least expect it and often, like Mary in the garden, we don't recognize him right away. Sometimes we don't realize that we've been visited by Jesus until after the fact when we can look in the rearview mirror. And it's very often through people that we would least suspect of being on a mission from Jesus.

Somewhere in your life, Jesus has touched you. In some way or another Jesus has shown up for you. It might be in a warm memory of singing a certain hymn when you were a child. Or being in church with your family. It might be a kind word and a leg up from someone you least expected. Or it might be a promotion or a good grade on an exam that you're pretty sure you didn't deserve. Or it might be an enveloping sense of peace that descends on you in the midst of a crisis or a heartbreak...that kind of peace that just completely calms us in the worst of circumstances. We rarely see Jesus. Very often we simply feel his presence.

And at some time in your life, Jesus has come to you. That's why you're here. Jesus brought you here...this morning...to St. Paul's Episcopal Church...for some reason known only to him. You aren't sleeping in this morning. You didn't go out to play golf or tennis or take a run. You aren't watching TV with your kids or sipping a latte at Starbucks. You are here. You are here. And you may not be fully aware yourself...at this moment...why you are here, but Jesus brought you here. He brought all of us here.

It always makes me smile to hear people talk about the moment they accepted Jesus as their personal savior. And they talk about taking Jesus with them everywhere and into all situations. I'm always tempted to want to alter that impression just a bit and remind them that *we* don't take Jesus anywhere. Jesus takes *us* where he wants us to be. And he stays with us because that's *his* mission, not ours.

The real victory...the real truth...is not that he came back. It's that he came back to get us and to keep us with him always. That's what's so special. He is after all, the Good Shepherd, and he looks after his flock!

Thanks be to God!!

AMEN.