

## **Sermon, 6 April 2008—Third Sunday of Easter**

Acts 2:14,36-41; Psalm 116; I Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

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

The Easter season is the longest festival season in the Church year: fifty days, stretching from Easter to Pentecost. In the arc of the year, this is to be the season of unrestrained joy and unanticipated dignity. The Easter season is not only seven weeks of seven days; these fifty days with Pentecost are also the seventh part of the calendar year. The season itself is the year's Sabbath, our time of rest and rejoicing, when God has finished all the work that God had purposed in the life of Christ, and when we consider all the work that God has done and see that it is indeed very good.

Kneeling was forbidden during the Easter season, because we had been raised with Christ. We have no claim, other than God's love, on those great outpourings of glory that only heal us if we receive them as gifts. In fact, on my own, I have a hard time thinking I am much; but if I have a share in the Resurrection of Christ, then God is what steadies me on my feet.

At the spiritual level, for us to stand side by side in God's presence during the Easter season is at first to be timid and unsteady as newborn colts in the freedom of God: first you totter, then bounce, then scamper, then discover how to become wind over the grass—all a joyful preparation for Pentecost. The early days of the Easter season are occasions to admit to each other a mutual share in our shy heart-broken joy at knowing that we are loved by the one we have all along most desired. Delight makes us gawky.

How can this glory be ours? We can neither attract it nor ensure it with the self-centered fearful fabrications of our ego. How, in other words, can we be an Easter people? How do we live as an Easter people? We must learn the answer to these questions. So for the next several weeks, as we move towards

Pentecost, I will be doing what was done in the ancient church: I will reflect with you on what we have been given to prop us up, to steady us, to guide us, to nurture us as a people that live in the Resurrection. In other words, we will consider the two dominical sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. In the ancient church, people prepared for baptism during Lent. During Lent, they were given the words of the faith—the Lord’s Prayer and the Creeds—but they did not yet receive the sacraments. At the Easter Vigil, over the course of that single night, they were given both sacraments without explanation. Then, during the Easter season, on the other side of those events—the inside, if I can put it that way—the mysteries of Baptism and Eucharist were reflected on and their significance probed.

Our lessons today describe both sacraments, but today we will reflect on baptism. Then we will spend two Sundays on the Eucharist. Next Sunday, we will look at the Eucharistic Prayer—what exactly are we asking God to do? After that, we will have an instructed Eucharist, so we can slow the action down—what exactly are we inviting each other to do together? That will prepare us to consider what it means to have a sacramental view of life—what might it mean to see God acting everywhere, not only in these two sacraments? And finally, if God is acting everywhere, what is the purpose we share with God in the world God loves? Then, I believe, we might be ready for Pentecost.

Now, if you want to know what Episcopalians believe, look in the Prayerbook. Our doctrines are enshrined in our prayers. We sometimes say “praying shapes believing;” in other words, the guidelines for our prayers are the guidelines for our beliefs. To understand what we believe baptism to be, we have only to look at what prayers are given to us to say when we baptize someone—and the words are quite conservative. Every search for new words in our liturgical reforms has been a search for ways to be faithful to the ancient

words. Being faithful to those ancient words, we are not left adrift to grope for new meaning. If these are not the words I would have chosen, then perhaps, on the one hand, I do not recall the narratives they echo in Scripture, or on the other hand, I do not recognize the experience they express from the ancient church, but I treasure them above all, because I want to be found on the same trajectory as those who were faithful in Scripture and faithful in history.

The fact is Anglicans have never been itchy for new doctrine—new ways to live out our doctrine, yes, new insights into doctrine, yes, but new doctrine, no. Instead, at moments of reform, we have asked what resonances and conveyances those ancient words have for us in our own day. The founding reformers of Anglicanism, in returning to original sources, went not solely to Scripture, as Calvin did, but to the liturgies of the ancient church, to remain faithful to the original structures and patterns.

So the first thing to see in this and every sacrament retained by the reformers and kept in the Prayerbook is this: the church acts on God's behalf. God has entrusted the church with the ministry of reconciliation, and baptism is the preeminent expression of that ministry.

Now, let's step aside for a moment and ask what this ministry of reconciliation is. We get off track if we think of reconciliation as patching up a quarrel, offering an apology, receiving a concession. The root word in "reconcile" is "call;" that little syllable "cil" carries the word "call." God called to Adam and Even in the cool of the garden, called them into council with Him. When they broke off that conversation, he found ways to call humanity back into conversation: God "reconciled" us, that is, he called us together again. In Creation we were called into companionship with God; in reconciliation, God is calling us back into conversation about the intended harmony of all Creation. The council of God's creatures is reconvened to its common purpose. This is

the ministry God has given the church to hold in trust and to enact on God's behalf. To baptize is to make visible and effective God's reconciliation, to convene again the communion of saints into the councils of heaven for the counsel of God.

So inviolable is the corporate nature of baptism, that it is always done by the church, even if it is being done one on one in a prison cell by with a cup of water, or in a hospital with water dribbled from a sponge, or even in the desert, where there is no water, and the dust itself is all that can be lifted and poured over the single other person. Each of those actions, done to reconcile that person to God in the name of the Trinity, is a baptism that the church acknowledges, because the work is too urgent and it is given to all of us to carry out whenever someone requests it of us. You act on God's behalf when you act for reconciliation; you act on the church's behalf whenever you offer an emergency baptism.

Because the Church is the Body of Christ, we belong together, and persons baptized that way are then brought to their sisters and brothers. All baptisms are now encouraged to be incorporated into public worship. The entire community rejoices, the entire community is strengthened, when new weaving into its shared life takes place where all can affirm it and enact it.

Second, we handle the body of the person who is being grafted onto our life. Some physical contact is essential in every sacrament. Because we are carnal and need the comfort of what we can hold, because we are fleshly and need our fearful fragility blessed, because we are physical and need more than ideas and words, on God's behalf, the church handles what God has made in order to concretize what God intends. In baptism, we recollect our original bath, when our body emerged from our mother's womb; or, if you prefer, we recollect the water of her womb itself. And in baptism the Church speaks of a

spiritual birth that completes and perfects our physical birth. This is not a repudiation of what is physical, because the body itself must get wet in baptism; it is instead a blessing of that flesh, honoring and receiving what God has given it to be, incorporating it into companionship.

Third, of course, baptism is an act of obedience. From the original days, the Church has provided this portal; and we continue what our forbearers in faith did, because we intend to show our solidarity with them. We are one with those apostles and martyrs and missionaries and monastics and householders. We follow the same Lord which they followed, and what they did to show their allegiance, their humble entry into his fellowship, that same thing we also do. This is what Christians do to be sealed as Christ's own forever and to be received into the household of God. We do what they did to be one of them and one with them.

Does this mean that only those who are baptized have found favor with God? Of course not. Scripture is full of evidence that God is more generous than we can imagine, always outstripping our notions of what is acceptable. Could the God whose steady evident efforts in both Testaments is to liberate those in bondage now have either run out of ideas or given up on the project? Are we to say that Christ can only reconcile the world to God under our supervision and with our approval, and only by the terms that we have come to accept as applicable to ourselves? I am not even sure that God is interested in our theories of liberal inclusivity; I've been in the presence of too many whose self-righteous defiance of exclusion only perpetuates the categories of who is in and who is out by denouncing them.

Frankly, my dears, I don't think God gives a damn—and I mean that in the technical sense of the phrase. But frankly, dear friends, we have been asked by God to give a blessing—and we are bound to obey if we are to remain in

good faith with what we have received, which has so richly blessed us. We are not only obligated to pass that blessing on, but we ought to find ourselves eager and overjoyed to pass it on, to offer to others what has been given to us when they request it. The only outcome is the increase of the love that can be shared among what God has created.

Finally, the prayers at baptism themselves tell us what is going on. If you look at the prayers starting on page 306 of the Book of Common Prayer, you will find the historical memory of water; it was there at the beginning of Creation, when Israel crossed the Red Sea, when John baptized in the Jordan; we recollect those things in order to see creation and liberation and forgiveness all present in baptism. But the prayer goes on: in our act of joyful obedience to Jesus, we are buried with Christ, reborn by the Spirit, raised to the life of grace, cleansed from sin, brought into fellowship, in order to continue forever in the risen life of Christ our Savior.

From the earliest days, the Church has had multiple meanings for baptism; no single interpretation exhausts it. In fact, it is saturated with interpretations, and its significance spills over and floods our reason out. But the single steady unstoppable pulse of its heart is the call for us to enter into the life of Christ. Baptism is the portal into that life. Were I preaching this sermon a thousand years in the past, I would point to the punctured side of the crucified Jesus, from which blood and water poured out, and I would say, “there, where that water is flowing; that is the font of baptism; that is the opening into the life of Christ, into which you can be plunged.” Our era finds that grotesque and distasteful, but its spiritual meaning is utterly clear.

What image works for you is yours to discern, but what matters is that the human life of God, which was the life of Jesus while he lived in his body, in baptism becomes your life in your body. The human life of God is now your

life. And this is not about a privileged status you need to protect, but about empowered service for the reconciliation of all people. What you thought you needed to protect and preserve and possess lies buried in the depths of the font. What is now yours is unencumbered and abundant and inexhaustible; you received without price, give without price. You received forgiveness without compromise; then forgive without compromise. You received love without calculation; so love without calculation. You received life without restriction; live without restriction.

If you want to know how the baptized live, listen to the prayer which is prayed over the newly baptized as it is prayed over us gathered here today.

Let us pray: “Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon us your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised us up to the new life of grace. Sustain us, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give us an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works, in Christ our Lord.”

So may it be.