

Pursuing our mission together

It took a while for the disciples to realize the enormity of the Easter event – which is one reason we celebrate Easter, not for one day, but for 50. Today’s Gospel portrays the male disciples, after hearing reports of Jesus’ resurrection, suddenly experiencing the risen Christ materializing out of thin air in their midst. Understandably, “they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.”

The Gospel writers all make clear the bodily nature of Christ’s resurrection: that this was not some intellectual, ethereal concept or the “appearance” of a spirit, but a real, tangible, corporeal reality – though one quite unprecedented in history. There was, and is, no body in Christ’s tomb. In Luke’s account Jesus sits and eats with his disciples – not because he said he needed to but to prove his tangible reality.

Jesus’ resurrected body was and is real just as much as his incarnate body – the one he was born, lived and died in – was real. Some heretics have offered the opinion that he only “appeared” to be incarnate as a human being and that the resurrection was a “spiritual” fact with no physical reality, both of which contradict the plain and repeated testimony of Scripture and represent some other religion besides orthodox Christianity.

So what?

Well for one thing, the fact that the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity, God the Son, chose to be incarnate as a mortal human being tells us that we and our tangible, mortal bodies and what we do in them matter to God enormously. God not only created us as fully integrated persons with minds, bodies and spirits but also chose to become fully incarnate himself and communicate directly, in person and in tangible ways, not just by words from on high and afar.

And when God the Son took all the sins of the world on his own tortured shoulders so that all people might have a chance to have their personal “rap sheets” wiped clean and be given a second chance here and now, Christ also rose again and walked among us to reinforce the importance of our being transformed here and now, in our lives here and now, and not just in abstract concepts but *concrete behaviors*, and not just as individuals but as *communities*.

I say all this because sometimes Christianity has been promoted – or dismissed – as “pie in the sky in the sweet bye’n’bye.” It is true that because of Christ’s death and resurrection we do have hope for awesome new life beyond this life, new life whose glories we can only dimly understand. We also have new life available to us *right now* as individuals, as communities, and together as people who have changed the world, are changing it and will change it by the grace, guidance and power of God.

There are powerful cultural forces in our world today which regularly tempt people to regard themselves as the center of the universe, that each individual is his or her own ultimate moral authority, that we can regard our “wants” as our needs, and that human beings are nothing more than bundles of hormones and appetites wrapped around credit cards.

If you want to know why the world's economy and environment are such a mess, that paragraph will go far to explain why.

In response, Christianity declares that our **prime identity** as human beings is not as consumers, or moral free agents or bundles of desires or even citizens of various countries but, as the author of the First Letter of John declares, as **children of God**.

If that is true, and if we recognize it as true, we will have such self-respect, serenity, confidence and community that the temptations I just mentioned will gradually seem more and more silly and trivial as well as dangerous, and we will build both locally and globally the Beloved Community which is the foretaste of the kingdom of God.

Such a community is one in which people of different ages, races, income and education levels, sexual orientations, genders, nationalities and abilities are cherished and encouraged to live lives which grow in wholeness and holiness in accordance with God's will. Such a community is one which reaches out beyond itself with the transforming word of God to a world which has lost its way and which is bleeding and broken as a result. Such a community is one which develops many kinds of leaders and connects with and respects leaders beyond itself but affirms that *all* of its members have the joyful opportunity and responsibility to embody its values in their lives and to spread God's word and values to the world as a direct commission of Christ.

Jesus says to some of his disciples in today's Gospel, "You are witnesses of these things," and he also says that "Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations," a task which only just began in the lifetimes of those who ate with him that night. We, here this morning, are among their heirs. *This* nation is among those to whom he commissioned his followers to come. And this is where we live, and where we minister.

"The mission of the Church," the Catechism in The Book of Common Prayer (page 855) declares "is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ." Doing that would solve so many of our world's problems, including violence, oppression and greed. "How does the Church pursue its mission?" the Catechism continues: "The Church pursues its mission as it prays and worships, proclaims the Gospel, and promotes justice, peace and love." "Through whom does the Church carry out its mission?" "The Church carries out its mission through the ministry of all its members."

All its members. Ministry is something *all* baptized Christians are called to do. All baptized Christians do represent Christ to the world already, and the impression that many people get of us may be the one they get of Christ. So, we had better be about the business of praying and worshipping, proclaiming the Gospel, and promoting justice, peace and love.

God knows the world needs it. God knows we ourselves need to be continually renewed and lifted up in community as we do these things. And we know that God stands ready to forgive, guide, inspire and empower us – all of us – to pursue our mission together. There's no one quite like each of us. God knows what we might do together. Let's find out.

(The Rev.) Francis A. Hubbard
St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
Monmouth Junction, NJ