

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

Easter Day/April 4, 2010

The Reverend E. Clifford Cutler

We have journeyed together through forty days of Lent to Easter in this annual rhythm of our spiritual lives. I am struck by how the scriptures have bracketed our time together. On Ash Wednesday we listened to Paul's words to the Corinthians: "We are treated as... dying, and see – we are alive!" Today, on Easter we hear Paul's words to those same Corinthians in a different letter: "All will be made alive in Christ." At early dawn two men appeared beside perplexed women gathered at the empty tomb to anoint Jesus' body. The men asked: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Christ is risen and to be found among those whose lives have changed; among those who have been given up on, as Paul said – and see they are alive!

The teacher Jaime Escalante died this week. In the early 1980s he taught Advanced Placement Calculus in the economically poor Hispanic neighborhood of East Los Angeles. I remember the year all eighteen of his students passed the exam. It was so extraordinary that the Educational Testing Service suspected cheating. They, like many, had given up on the barrio. The national papers reported the incident. Escalante with a confidence born of hard work and faith in his students chose not to react indignantly. He merely had twelve of his students retake the test and they all passed. In a last interview he said, "Believe in your kids. They will surprise you." Christ is risen and to be found among those who surprise us.

After the encounter at the empty tomb and the message of resurrection, the surprised women (among whom were Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of James) went back and told what they had seen and heard to the eleven apostles and other followers gathered around them. The overwhelmed disciples suspected the women of telling an idle tale and did not believe them. We all too easily allow ourselves particularly when stressed to harden into skepticism and negativity. But it is at times when we are overwhelmed that we especially need to see the possibilities of new life.

An executive coach is working with a manager who was passed over for an important promotion. It had nothing to do with technical skill or experience. Rather the person had cultivated a dismissive and cynical demeanor meant, I suppose, to show superiority or evidence of being “one of the guys.” But in difficult times who wants that? People desperately need hope and that is what the company was looking for. Employees will feed on hope and pass it on to others. Its positive energy is contagious. The company wanted someone who could realistically illuminate possibility and foster that trait in others.

Peter seems to have been the exception among the eleven apostles. He had not calcified into skepticism and dismissal of what the women had to say. Instead, he allowed himself to wonder. I wonder if what Mary, Joanna and Mary said could possibly be true. I wonder if what Jesus had taught has happened. He got up to see for himself and ran to the tomb. He found it just as they had said, and returned in awe and utter amazement.

The rhythm of our spiritual life swings from Lent to Easter, from penitence to praise, from disregard to high regard, from suspicion to the surety of hope. We get out of rhythm or break stride when we dismiss what others say out of hand as did ten of the apostles. We break our spiritual stride when because of where someone comes from we suspect their competence. We trip ourselves up by going negative. None of us can begin to understand or see anything if we start at “no.”

Peter does not label what he has heard; he goes and checks it out. He wonders whether it might be true. He is open to possibility. He has gotten his feet back under him. He has found his spiritual rhythm. Paul explored this rhythm in his final account given to the Romans, “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint...” (Rom. 5: 5). Hope does not disappoint because God is the God of resurrection. Hope does not disappoint because God is the One who makes “all things new” (Rev. 21: 5).

Easter is not about looking for the living among the dead, but seeing those some think as good as dead to be full of life in Christ. In God “all things are possible” (Matt. 19: 26). The slate is wiped clean and full of promise. This is the meaning of Easter. Students need hope today. Companies need hope today. You and I need hope today. Let’s get our feet back under us. Pick up our stride. Christ is risen. The Lord has risen indeed.

Amen.