

Sermons at Saint Paul's

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

The Third Sunday of Easter/April 18, 2010
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Resurrection is an eye-opening experience. Meeting the risen Christ was literally an eye-opening encounter for Paul, "something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored." Two years ago, during Easter week, I was at Tabgha on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee or Tiberius as it is called in this Gospel passage. It is one of my favorite places because of what happened there. Tabgha is an eye-opening place. The day itself was overcast. From where the bus stopped it was about a hundred yards walk down to the edge of the lake. There is a rock outcropping where it is said Jesus stood to call to Peter and the other disciples while they fished. About 20 feet away, there was a charcoal fire on which fish cooked and bread baked. It is now enclosed by a small Franciscan chapel.

The eye-opener is the juxtaposition of *this* charcoal fire with that earlier one at which Peter warmed himself within the gate of the high priest's courtyard. There Peter denied Jesus three times before the cock crowed. Here at this new charcoal fire Peter pledged his love for Jesus three times. There are three heart-shaped pillars in the ground to memorialize this profession of love. The place is eye-opening to me because, just as the day was overcast when I was there, Peter's denial had cast a shadow over him. What could he do, what did he feel eligible to do, but to return to fish; and even there he had no success. His eyes were opened by the grace of Jesus who accepted him as he was and charged him to feed and tend to humanity, Jesus' flock.

The place is eye-opening to me because I had come there from the Creativity for Peace Camp in Israel. There Jewish and Arab girls encounter one another initially in anger and accusation. Mistrust and even hatred hang over them like an overcast sky. They need to tell their story in the face of the enemy. If each who is an enemy to the other can hear the other's pain there is a good chance that an empathic

connection can be made. There is a breakdown of the hard shell of prejudice, and a breakthrough to compassion. Eyes are opened and lives are transformed.

It reminds me of Saul, or Paul as he soon would be known. "He was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord." We talk about blind rage. It cast a shadow over him. He could not see past it. Then like the Jewish and Arab girls telling their story in the presence of the enemy, he hears a voice: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" The eye-opener for Paul is that he wants to know the identity, not just the stereotype but the real identity, of the other. "I am Jesus," he hears. Now he is struck with a different kind of blindness. Because of it, there is no chance of going back to the old ways. Then, after three days, like Peter, he feels this warm, embracing grace of God. Jesus accepts him as he is and charges him to proclaim the name of Jesus before all people saying, "He is the Son of God." There is a breakthrough to compassion that will change lives far more than murderous threats ever did.

Eye-opening experiences transform lives. It happened with Peter, in the encounter of Jewish and Arab girls, and with the Apostle Paul. In each transformed life we find the movement from breakdown to breakthrough. Peter's unrealistic standard for himself that he could never deny Jesus had to break down so that he could break through to lovingly be there for others. Like the enmity of partisan girls in Israel, our relationships when they are overcast with suspicion and fear need to break down so that we can break through to greater understanding of one another. And like Paul, transformation happens when the coercive push of our own agendas breaks down so that we can break through to compassionate openness.

One of my eye-opening experiences of this kind of breakthrough took place a couple of years ago. Our son had had a difficult time growing up. There were a lot of complications that I did not always understand. I pushed my own expectations and there was plenty of push back. Our ideal selves gave way to our human selves and there was fear enough to go around. In his mid-twenties we were talking on the phone. He said, "Dad, my growing up must have been awfully frustrating for you." He understands, I thought. I added, "It had to have been difficult for you, too." Here we were two real people, far from perfect, no longer pushing, with no more fear than any two human beings have a right to have. It was a moment of breakthrough. Somewhere in my heart I was singing. There were no words, but those that the Book of Revelation suggests are as good as any: "To the one seated on the throne (and to

the risen Christ) be blessing and honor and glory and might..." It wasn't forced. It was just one of those expressions from the heart like a song, as we say in Psalm 30: "Therefore my heart sings to you without ceasing." That's what an eye-opening moment feels like to me.

Resurrection is an eye-opening experience. The risen Christ comes to us as we are. God doesn't want perfect people, but real people. For most of us that in itself is pretty eye-opening. God trusts that compassion will win out over coercion in the end. I think that is what the cross and resurrection are all about. We meet the risen Christ and fear dissolves into faith. I think that is what happened to Peter. He feared all he could do was to turn back to what he had done before. Instead, Christ called him to be a rock of faith on which others could lean in their need. We have known moments of transformation like this and felt a kind of song freely well up in our hearts. It doesn't end there. Jesus takes us from our own sense of well-being and enlists us in his purpose to seek the well being of all. "Feed my sheep," Jesus charged Peter. Jesus commissioned Paul out of his blindness to proclaim the name that means freedom and the grace to see. Jesus calls you and me just as we are wherever we are, by the grace of God. This experience of Easter is eye-opening. We see the risen Jesus, whom we know personally as freedom and compassion. He says to us simply and directly: "Follow me."

Amen.