

Homily for 3 Easter, Year C
S. Stephen's, Providence
05/01/2022

+ In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen.

Now I know it's been two weeks since Easter Day,
so you might not be primed and ready to respond back,
"The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!"

Nevertheless, our Easter celebration continues today
and all the way until the Feast of Pentecost in June.

An English bishop noted that we Anglicans are very good
about doing Forty Days of Lent.

Why is it that we seem to shy away from truly embracing
Fifty Days of Easter?

I was away last week, leading a hymn festival in Chattanooga, Tennessee,
and one of the hymns we sang
is the same one we'll sing at the end of (10:00 Mass) today –
Christ is alive!

I was struck by the urgency of the text, and its insistence

on the here and now of Christ's Resurrection,
no longer bound to distant events in Palestine.

Our liturgy does the same thing –

we proclaim at Easter, “Christ IS Risen!”

Our hymns, our music, all our prayers –

they speak of it all in the present tense;

because though it is an event in time,

it is indeed ongoing and ever present, ever new and ever spreading.

Everything the Church does in her worship and her sacraments

flows from the energy of that statement, “Christ is alive!”

“The Lord is risen!”

We respond to and unite our selves with a present, living reality –

not the mere memory of a past event.

In our Eucharist, we partake not of a memorial supper,

but a heavenly meal in which we encounter the very Living God.

Indeed, our God – the Living God – seems very focused on feeding us.

In our Gospel reading today,

we arrive at the very ending of John's Gospel,

and a simple meal of fish and bread by the side of a lake.

John has long been my favorite Gospel,

so much so that I feel like I know it inside out.

And yet I was struck by something as if for the first time this week.

In a Gospel so perfectly structured, worded, nuanced –

not a word, an image, a detail out of place or without charged meaning,

there is something a little strange about this 21st chapter:

namely, that it occurs after it seems like the author of John's Gospel

is done telling the story.

After the initial accounts of the Resurrection,

with Jesus appearing to Thomas and breathing the Holy Spirit on them,

which you heard last week,

the Evangelist goes on to write,

“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.”

That makes a pretty good ending, does it not?

And yet there's more – namely, the portion we have heard this morning.

And maybe that's precisely the point.

In a Gospel which has such a distinctive prologue –

In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God ...

and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us ...

perhaps we should not be surprised that it also should include
an epilogue.

Like the actors coming back out after the curtain has dropped
on the final scene of a play,

or a final scene in a movie that rolls after the credits,

or even the postscript at the end of a letter,

this scene on the beach unfolds before us.

A few of the disciples, including Nathaniel,

who first appeared at the very beginning of John's Gospel,

are going about their labors in the boat,

trying to bring in a good catch of fish early in the day.

They have caught nothing,

and so this stranger on the beach, Jesus, as it turns out,

suggests almost playfully, impishly,
that they simply try casting their net on the other side of the boat.
Of course, the net is suddenly full and overflowing, teeming with fish.
And we have that classic scene of impetuous,
act first, ask questions later Peter
throwing on his clothes and swimming to shore,
responding with great joy to their realization that it is Jesus standing there.
Frankly, this closing chapter of John invites more questions than answers,
and there is not time in one sermon to plumb the depths of them all.
Why is it that Resurrected Jesus is hard to recognize?
Where is Resurrected Jesus in between these appearances?
Does he hang out on earth, and if so, where? and with who?
Why does Peter put on his clothes to jump in the water and swim?
These are things we will never have the answer to on this side of eternity,
but there are three things we can take away from the Gospel reading –
(and yes, here's the miniature version of that classic three pointer sermon:)
1) Jesus is truly and physically risen from the dead.
If there is a part of you that thinks for even a moment

that perhaps the Resurrection of Jesus is just about remembering him,
or that the Disciples realized after his death
that he lived on in their memories and in reenacting what he did,
then think again.

As we have seen in scripture, the Resurrected Jesus is somewhat odd,
appearing and disappearing,
not needing to use doors the way we might to get into locked rooms,
but he is very definitely alive.

He is alive enough to ask Thomas to place his hands in his pierced side,
and he is alive enough that he not only eats bread and fish,
but also prepares them over an open charcoal fire.

This Risen Jesus is truly risen, and with a physical body.

2) Our labors are in vain without Jesus.

This may be painfully obvious, but it needs to be stated anyway.

John seems to be making a point in this epilogue,
which features very skilled fisherman
who know the Sea of Galilee intimately
nevertheless failing to bring in fish.

That is, until Jesus appears.

Then their nets are overflowing, but without breaking.

This foreshadows the work of the apostles to come,

with the dramatic growth of the church,

and its mission to Gentile and Jew alike.

The Body of Christ in all its rapid growth

will indeed be teeming with life,

so much so that we might think it capable of bursting,

but the net holds.

This is possible only because it is done with Jesus at the center of it –

it is in response to his command, his instruction,

and it is done with his words and actions at the forefront of their minds.

They plunge those nets into the water in faith,

just as the stewards at the wedding in Cana filled the jars with water,

acting only on his instructions and Mary's faith.

3) Third and last, the fact that this final chapter of John

centers on the work and mission of the disciples,

and the fact that it is written as an epilogue is precisely the point!

The story doesn't end with the Resurrection.

It doesn't even end with the Disciples!

It continues! The mission is only begun at the Resurrection –

it goes on with them, and it continues with you and me!

The ending of John's Gospel hints at what is to come with the disciples,

even Peter's being led to Rome,

and confessing before the highest authorities of the Empire

that Jesus is Lord, and not the Emperor.

And Paul! Paul hasn't even arrived on the scene yet.

Our Reading from the Book of Acts this morning

introduces the man who will become the most dominant and influential

figure in the early Church.

It's only all just beginning – and that is the point.

That fresh, energetic, new Life bursting out of the tomb on Easter Day

is continuing and spreading, even now.

It has never stopped.

It goes on ahead of us to conquer every future age and time.

It continues with you and me, all of us together.

And if you're sitting here this morning
thinking that God can't possibly use you,
then I hope you noticed the grand sense of humor that God has.
Paul, who, with Peter, will be one of the twin pillars of the Church,
is actually responsible for the death – the killing! – of Christians
before his conversion on the road to Damascus.
And Peter denied Jesus not just once, or twice, but three times.
But as the author of John's Gospel goes on to show,
the Risen Lord is one who brings with him restoration, reconciliation,
and redemption.
After our portion of the Gospel reading for this morning ends,
Jesus goes on to ask Peter three times if he loves him:
Jesus rehabilitates Peter –
he offers him that chance to make amends –
to be restored to right relations.
If God can build his Church upon those who at one point
both denied and even persecuted him,
what else is there that God cannot do,

even with the likes of you and me?

The story is not over, my friends, it is only just beginning.

John the beloved Disciple knew that as well,

when he wrote the final words of his Gospel,

which paradoxically spell out a mere beginning:

But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.

Happy Easter, Church.

Amen, and alleluia.

Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia.