

April 7, 2013

Acts 5:27-32

Psalm 150

Revelation 1:4-8

JOHN 20:19-31

## **HOPE, PEACE, PURPOSE and BLESSING**

About 10 or 12 years ago, my wife was up in Kennebunkport, Maine visiting family one weekend. That Sunday morning, she worshiped at the nearest Episcopal Church -- St. Anne's, Kennebunkport. There were 200 people at the early service. Now that's not a typical attendance for an early service in any Episcopal church I'm familiar with, even ours. The rumor around town was that President George W. Bush, who was in town visiting his parents, would be coming to the service, which explains the attendance surge.

The rumor was wrong. The (to say the least) unusually large early service crowd didn't get to experience the presence of an incumbent President of the United States, which would have indeed been a thrill. Instead, the people had to settle for Jesus.

In our celebrity-obsessed culture, people may have gotten blase about being able to experience The Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist every time they take communion, to be able to read Christ's own words -- translated into their own language -- whenever they want by opening the Bible, and to be able to experience the Holy Spirit whenever they follow God's guidance for their own lives or as part of a community.

Maybe if communion was only available once a year, or if anyone wanted to read Christ's words he or she had to learn Greek, or if the Holy Spirit only offered guidance and strength to those who were ordained or were monks or nuns, then those who think something's importance is measured in inverse proportion to its accessibility might be more impressed. But that's not the way it is. God in Christ has come to earth, and still does come in word, sacrament, spirit and community.

We do have Christ's gift of himself in the consecrated bread and wine at every Eucharist -- and for those unable to be physically present in the church

building, we “take church to them” with communion in home, hospital and nursing home. And this wonderful ministry is not just limited to clergy like Deacon Pete and me. Today we will be commissioning four Lay Eucharistic *Visitors*, duly nominated by me, trained by Deacon Pete and licensed by our bishop, who also will take not only the precious body and blood of Christ with them but will also take *us* with them, and the people they visit to us, because “church” is not a building but a community. Jesus said “wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”

We do have the guidance of the Holy Spirit available for all who sincerely turn to God. (People don’t always *follow* God’s guidance, but are always *offered* it.) And we do have Christ’s words, available in a variety of careful, faithful translations. Including the words in today’s Gospel, words spoken to men who never expected to hear Christ speak again, to men who on Easter Sunday were frightened and depressed, to men whose lives were transformed when they simply *showed up* to be with each other. Not only were they not expecting a celebrity, not only were they not expecting the risen Christ, they weren’t expecting *anything* except perhaps to share their fears and depression with each other.

They knew Jesus had died on Good Friday. They knew one of their members (Judas) had betrayed him, another (Peter) had denied him, and nine more had wimped out and disappeared when Jesus was arrested. And the Beloved Disciple himself was not “rubbing it in” that he alone of the men had had to guts to stay with Jesus and with a number of women at the cross. Gutsy or gutless, the end result was the same: their Lord was dead. And now some wild report from Mary Magdalene that she had seen him that morning. Didn’t that just make it worse, didn’t her saying he was alive just remind them how dead Jesus was -- and remind them of their suspicion that she perhaps was not quite right in the head?

Christ had to come to *them* personally, too, for the reality to sink in. And Christ’s first words to them on Easter were not reproach or condemnation, but “Peace be with you.” SHALOM: the fullness of God’s serenity, wellness, well-being, wholeness and completeness of relationship. And then, even more startling, Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

Both of these are Christ’s words to *us*, too. Christ *is* alive, *now*, not just on that Easter day and the following Sunday long ago. He offers us first of all his

presence, the evidence of his conquest of sin and death, and the sign that thanks to him, *we also* are *not* fated to be conquered by sin and death (unless we choose to be). So his first gift to us is **hope**: hope, whatever our past lives have been like, that we can be made new by God by turning to him in faith and have hope to share in Christ's victory over sin and death.

And Christ's second gift to us is **peace**: Shalom for ourselves and more to share. Serenity, well-being, healing, community. And another wonderful thing about God's gifts is that the more we share them, the more we receive ourselves.

And the third gift just from this morning's Gospel is **purpose**: no matter how young or old, whatever our talents or abilities, we too are *commissioned*: *sent* by Christ into the world in witness to his life, his love, his truth, his wisdom, to share them all with a broken and often clueless world.

And finally, if we receive these first three gifts in faith, we have a special **blessing** from the Lord: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

So, if any of you came this morning expecting to see the President of the United States in our pews, I'm afraid you're going to leave disappointed. And I suspect next week will be the same, and the week after as well. But if you're looking for the Real Presence of Christ in the sacrament, for his words of Life for your life, and for the Holy Spirit present among the humble faithful prayerfully gathered together, then I think you came to one of many right places. And having come, may we all "through believing have **life** in Christ's name."

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