

Year C Easter 4, April 25, 2010
Acts 9:36-43
Psalm 23
Revelations 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Resurrection People

by Deacon Bob Gay

Did you ever meet an Episcopalian who does not enjoy Easter? I know I never did. We certainly do a grand job with the liturgy, the flowers, the music and all the other aspects of the celebration. And by the time Lent is over I can not wait to proclaim “Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.” Yes, Easter is definitely part of who we are.

This was driven home for me last month when Esther and I took a trip to Chicago. We went to there to help celebrate our grandson Damen’s second birthday. Everyone had a great time and Damen ended up with icing from one side of his face to the other. All we had to do was take pictures, say how cute he was and we did not have to worry about cleaning him up.

Whenever we make the trip out to Chicago, Esther and I try to build in enough time to take advantage of some of the many fun and exciting things that a big city has to offer. This last time, one of the things we did was to go hear a performance by the Chicago Symphony. The work we heard was Bach’s *Saint John’s Passion*. Bach composed this piece while he lived in Leipzig. It was meant to be performed on Good Friday when the passion is read from Saint John’s gospel. *Saint John’s Passion* is an oratorio and it contains the words of John’s gospel.

As I was listening to the chorus sing the arias that are interposed among the words of Saint John, I was struck by how differently they presented the whole concept of the redemption. Let me quote to you some lines from a couple of the arias:

I see in truth with greatest terror
Thy holy body now blood-covered,
But even this my joy must waken,
It makes me free from hell and death.

Here is another quote:

Jesus, this thy passion
Is my purest pleasure,
These thy wounds, thy crown and scorn
Are my heart's true pasture.

You see Bach was a good Lutheran, through and through; and Luther saw the cross as the focal point of his belief. I would have to say that the focal point of my belief is the empty tomb. Neither point of view is right or wrong. Both points of view are necessary. You can not have Easter without Good Friday. But, without Easter, Good Friday is a disaster. To put it another way, the *Saint John's Passion* may have been a big hit in Germany, but I much prefer the *Hallelujah Chorus* that brought them to their feet in England. Obviously, both the cross and the empty tomb are central symbols of our faith. Still I feel that from the music that moves us to the words we use in our liturgy we Episcopalians tend to see things more as a "Resurrection People."

Points of view influence a lot of things. It does not matter what that point of view is about, be it nationalism, culture, or which sport team we support. Moreover, since our points of view are so deeply imbedded in our thought process, we have to be aware that they can make it very difficult for us to understand any idea or belief that does not agree with our presumptions of how things are. Another danger we have to acknowledge is that these same presumptions can lead us to start to take for granted the very ideas and beliefs

that our point of view does support. The problem with letting our points of view limit what we believe and how we act is clearly shown in today's gospel.

John tells an apparently simple story in the gospel. Jesus is walking in the Temple. Some Jews confront Jesus and ask him to say plainly if he is the Messiah or not. It is helpful here to remember that the writer of John use the term "the Jews" as shorthand for the religious elite. Jesus' answer takes only six short verses but that answer contains nine points:

1. He has already told them.
2. They do not believe his answer.
3. The works that Jesus performs he does in the Father's name.
4. These works testify to who Jesus is.
5. The reason they do not believe is because they are not of his sheep.
6. Jesus' sheep know him and follow him.
7. Jesus gives his sheep eternal life.
8. No one will ever snatch his sheep from Jesus.
9. The Father and Jesus are one.

If today's reading included one more verse, we would have heard that the Jews got so angry with Jesus' answer that they took up stones to kill him for blasphemy. What we have here is a failure to communicate. The reason there is no communication is that the Jews have a point of view that makes it impossible for them to understand who Jesus is and what he is saying. Ah, the dangers of not understanding your own point of view.

To the Jews, the Messiah is supposed to be a political liberator who will free the Israelites and bring back their kingdom. This point of view is based on hundreds of years of longing for the return of the glory of David and Solomon. That is why the Jews do not believe Jesus and his answer. That answer, that is the works that Jesus performs, does not fit their point of view. It is all well and good to cure the sick, feed the hungry, and even to raise the dead, but none of this has anything to do with what the Messiah should

be doing which is winning victories, getting rid of the Romans, and restoring the old political system. Jesus is both other than and more than their expectations of what the Messiah should be.

What is even worse, Jesus is making claims to be God. This is why the Jews want to stone him to death. If you look at the text for today, Jesus does not say directly that he is God, but the Jews got the message. It is no accident that today's psalm is Psalm 23. It is the most famous and probably the favorite of all psalms. I think it safe to say that it was the same for the Jews of Jesus' time. How does it start? "The Lord is my shepherd." And to the Jews, the term "The Lord" means God. The Jews knew what Jesus was saying when Jesus starts talking about his sheep. But once again, their prevailing point of view would not, could not admit to a divine Messiah. That would be too startling, too uncomfortable, too unpredictable, and too uncontrollable.

This brings us back to our own point of view as a "Resurrection People." What does it mean when we proclaim that Jesus rose from the dead? What does it mean to live as a Christian in the light of the empty tomb, to be "Resurrection People"? When we proclaim "Alleluia, Christ has risen." do we take time to grasp what that really means?

If I believe, really believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, then that changes literally everything. The Resurrection is the proof that Jesus is who he said he was. It is the proof that we have a God who loves us beyond any measure, beyond any comprehension. Because Christ died and then rose, the whole of creation changed. Death was overcome. The future of creation took off in a new direction. It turned the world upside down. What was of value, what was of importance, became unimportant. Thus, I have to choose between struggling, grasping for a sort of temporary glory in this world or accepting the free gift of real and eternal glory.

I have walked so many times with Jesus in Solomon's Portico just like the Jews. I have argued with him; I have refused to listen to him; and thus I was incapable of understanding him. Why? Because believing in a risen Jesus is too startling, too

uncomfortable, too unpredictable and too uncontrollable. If that tomb is empty, if Jesus is risen, then I have to place myself in his hands. I have to give up control. I have to put aside the idols of the world and follow Jesus wherever he would lead me. This was not easy to do. It still remains a struggle because those idols are very tempting.

But there is good news. Remember Psalm 23? Remember how it starts? “The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.” Two simple sentences. The first sentence declares my relationship with Jesus. He is the shepherd. It is he that I trust. Period! There are no conditions, no caveats. It does not say I will trust Jesus most of the time, or that I will trust Jesus with the exception, of course, of listening to my financial advisor first. No, it is the risen Jesus I trust. The second sentence declares the result of that relationship. I shall not want. Period! Again, there are no conditions. It does not say I shall not want for most things. It does not say I shall not want for spiritual things. The good news is that I have never been happier since I have decided to leave Solomon’s Portico, since I have decided that I am not in control and God is.

This simple, short passage that we just heard as today’s Gospel shows us we have to be careful about taking lightly our ideas about who God is and what he is doing. We have to understand, truly understand, what Jesus was trying to tell those Jews in Solomon’s Portico. We should not be too harsh on the Jews who we hear arguing with Jesus. They knew only about the works that Jesus had already performed. We know so much more. We know about his passion and his resurrection. We are a “Resurrection People.” Standing in the light of that empty tomb, I have no choice but to let Jesus be in control and to follow him. Do you want to come along? Let’s go together.