

## SERMON – Easter Sunday; Redeemer, 3/23/08

Occasionally my incoming email will include a story that sheds light on scripture and on the Christian life. This one, slightly adapted, arrived this past week; perhaps you saw it as well. It tells of a group of salesmen who traveled together to a regional conference in Chicago. They had assured their wives they would be home in time for Friday night dinner. In their rush, with hands full of tickets and briefcases, one of the men knocked over a table which had held a display of apples. Apples flew everywhere. Without stopping or looking back, the men managed to reach the plane in time for their nearly-missed boarding.

All but one! He paused, took a deep breath, and experienced a twinge of compassion for the girl whose apple stand had been overturned. He told his colleagues to go on without him, waved good-bye, and asked one of them to call his wife when they arrived home to explain his taking a later flight. Then he returned to the terminal where apples lay scattered on part of its floor.

He was glad he did. The teen-aged girl in charge of the display was blind! She was crying softly in frustration as she groped for her spilled produce with the crowd swirling about her; busy and distracted, no one was able to stop to help. The salesman knelt on the floor with her, gathered up the apples, put them back on the table and helped organize her display. As he did this, he noticed that some of the fruit had been bruised, and he set these aside in another basket. When he had finished, he pulled out his wallet and said to the girl, "Here, please take this money to cover the damage. Are you okay?" She nodded through her tears. He went on, "I'm sorry this was so upsetting for you." As the salesman started to walk away, the bewildered blind girl called to him, "Mister...." He paused and turned as she continued, "Are you Jesus?" He stood looking at her for a moment. Then slowly he made his way to catch the later flight with the memory of that question still playing in his mind: "Are you Jesus?"

This contemporary parable, less nuanced but still reminiscent of the story of the Good Samaritan, raises for us the relationship between seeing and believing. Though the girl was physically blind—or possibly because she was blind—she believed that Jesus himself had engaged in this generous loving act. She “saw” Jesus in what had transpired. What she knew of Jesus—in other words her faith—caused her to find him in the action of setting her life back to right after such an upset. We, too, view the man's behavior as Christ-like. In a world that can seem blind to Christ's love and grace, here was an instance of revelation and of insight. The story relates to the Gospel reading a couple of Sundays back, when Jesus restored the sight of the man born blind who then recognized the Christ in the one who had healed him. The girl in the story believes without having seen, and she revealed an insight that a sighted person would likely not have arrived at. Meanwhile, the man could regard his action through the eyes of her faith.

All four of our Gospels, and especially John's, play with this interaction between seeing and believing. Over and again, it is the blind who “see” and the sighted who turn up blind to the love of Christ. Faith, we are told, is the evidence of things unseen. But what has all this to do with Easter? Just about everything! The tomb's large stone that separated the living from the dead, or so it seemed, also separated light and dark, vision and blindness. As Isaiah tells us in the great prophesy heard during Advent: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. God has opened and will continue to open our eyes to salvation history—that story that shows us over and over, in Scripture as well as in our daily routines, how our lives can be enlightened by God's grace. But first, we must open our eyes to its possibilities and our hearts to its opportunities. The salesman in our story did that: he recognized a small and otherwise nondescript opportunity to be of help. In this parish, the initiators and supporters of the African Children's Mission and the Interfaith Hospitality Network opened their eyes to the possibilities of bringing Christ into the lives of others; they opened their hearts to the opportunity of

-serving those whom Christ served: the sick and the outcast, and also anyone who would find in their compassionate behavior the love of Jesus.

There are two moments of sublime recognition and clairvoyance in John's account of the Easter moment. The first occurred as Peter and the other disciple, also referred to as the "beloved disciple," reached the tomb. The two went in; Simon Peter saw the linen wrappings and head cloth rolled up, but as yet drew no conclusions about what he witnessed; the other disciple both saw *and* believed. He looked at the same scene but his eyes were informed by faith. Even though neither disciple yet understood God's intention—that is, they were still blind to the greater meaning of what they witnessed—the one believed. He experienced an insight as yet unavailable to Peter—that the one who now must be free from death is the very Son of God, and this belief came *before* he saw the risen Jesus. The second moment of recognition, one of the most poignant scenes in all the Gospels, took place as Mary Magdalene entered the tomb, she who was allowed the greater vision. She saw Jesus whom she took for the gardener, and supposing that he might have removed the body, she offered to take responsibility for it. Jesus replied with one word: *Mary*. Then, as if scales fell from her eyes, Mary recognized the Lord and exclaimed *Rabboni!* The word means "teacher" but is a form of the word *Rabbi* used in addressing God. Thus Mary not only related the physical identity of Jesus with the risen Christ; she also expressed for the early Church a new vision of Jesus as the one to be worshipped as God.

How do you and I view this rolling away of the stone that offers Easter's new view on life and death? Must we see the risen Christ to believe? Must we, like Thomas, view the scared indentations on his hands, feet and side before our faith can be revealed in our behavior? Or will our faith permit us to find the risen Christ in ourselves and in one another, sight unseen? Writing from prison, St. Paul urges the people of Colossus to *reveal* the Christ in one another, in the way they mete out their daily existence. Then, raised with Christ, they can seek the things that are above, that are in the light, opening their hearts to the good things of the spirit rather than wallowing in the dark things of the flesh. This is how you and I also can emerge from the tomb—resuscitated, reborn, with the Christ in us arisen and revealed. And the astonishing thing is that we don't have to wait for Easter Sunday to venture out of our tombs and leave our dead selves behind. God promises us that any and each day—any and each hour—we can be reborn, dying to our own selves and rising to the new self to which God calls us. My take on this is that we don't just do this once, but over and again, as we ask God's and one another's forgiveness and then allow our better selves to prevail. As the hymnist John Keble wrote: *New every morning is the love our wakening and uprising prove; through sleep and darkness safely brought, restored to life and power and thought.*

Like the salesman in our story, you and I may occasionally be mistaken for Jesus; but it's more likely that the love of Jesus will be revealed through us, through our words and actions. May our lights so shine before other human beings that they will see our good works and glorify God who is in heaven.  
AMEN

***P. W. Sipple***

***3/20/08***