

Easter 4 - Year C
John 10:22-32
The Mutuality of Resurrection

There are multiple stories in Scripture about someone being restored to life. Going back to the prophet Elijah, 1 Kings – Elijah brought the son of the widow of Zarephath back to life. Those stories were written down as extraordinary events, but they did not transform history or entire communities.

Christ's Resurrection – as we hear about it today, two thousand years later – seems to many to be God's mysterious act – a 'one-off,' the meaning of which is primarily that we, too, will enjoy a resurrected life after death. This casual interpretation of Christ's Resurrection suggests God offered us a ticket to the after-life, making belief in the Resurrection about getting to heaven, about individual salvation.

I don't agree with that interpretation – the Resurrection was not God's one-way action. I do not think the early church had that understanding, either. In Acts particularly, *mutuality* is the Easter story, mutuality meaning we participate in the Resurrection by our actions in this life. Mutuality meaning all of us are involved; mutuality meaning held in common, mutuality meaning a corresponding relationship. The Good News, *He is risen!* anticipates our transformation, here and now. We join in the new covenant.

There is a 16th c. painting by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel – Adam and God reach towards each other, their extended forefingers touching. Mutuality, humankind and God, reaching for each other. That's how I understand the Resurrection.

Still, we bear in mind the elemental belief in the Scriptures that God *initiates* the relationship with us, that God seeks us out long before we seek God.

The 23rd Psalm says, *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.* The verb translated as 'follow' may also be translated as 'pursue'. We are pursued by God. It is God who "*makes me lie down in green pastures*", who "*leads me beside still waters.*" This is the persistent God whom John Calvin characterized as "the hound of heaven." This God demands to be near us, whether or not we seek God, whether or not we acknowledge God.

The Resurrection is about God reaching for us, God continuing to be near us. The mutuality begins with our witness.

Scripture readings during Easter season focus on how the Good News was shared, how people came to believe and became spiritually infused with the Resurrection as being God's new creation – the new creation in which we *share* in life-giving ministry and set aside the old ways of power and aggression.

Mary Magdalene was the first witness, she recognized Jesus by his voice. Mary tells Peter and

the disciple whom Jesus loved. The disciples experience the risen Christ, and Thomas touches the newly created, the resurrected (not resuscitated) body of Christ.

An important point is made in these post-crucifixion appearances – Jesus did not re-assume his earthly body or his life on earth. He was known by his voice, by his wounds, and in the breaking of the bread. His resurrected body was different somehow, not immediately recognized even by those who knew him well.

Last Sunday we heard of the tumultuous conversion of Saul – a spiritual and life-changing turning after his encounter with the risen Christ. Paul went on to share the Good News of his own transformed life, a life transformed by belief in the Risen Lord.

Today we hear about Peter's transformed life: Peter, who walked and talked with Jesus, who was one of the first to witness the risen Christ. Peter continues the Lord's work of healing. Luke says, through Peter's actions *'many believed in the Lord.'*

The Good News spread – by the power of witness, word, and action.

Today's Gospel takes us back to Jerusalem, before the crucifixion. The Jews ask Jesus, with some impatience, to tell them plainly whether he is the Messiah. Jesus says, *I have told you and you do not believe... you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, I know them and they know me.* Jesus' words may sound like a harsh response, a declaration of exclusivity; in reality, the response is logical. If you do not believe, then you are not among my followers. Well, I think we can agree with that.

Dale talked last Sunday about 'belief in' as our *response* of trust and acknowledgment, not our intellectual assent. I think that is what Jesus is getting at, when he says 'my sheep hear my voice and know me.' Jesus has told 'the Jews' who he is by his healing actions, *"the works I do in my Father's name"*; they have not believed. Their *unbelief* does not change who Jesus is. But he *has* told them – included them in the divine initiative, the reaching out. They have failed to respond with trust or recognition.

Of those who do follow him, Jesus says, *'I give them eternal life...no one will snatch them out of my hand.'* No matter what the future, God's hand holds us, and nothing can snatch us away. Protected, sheltered, held in God's hand. A wonderful image, that outstretched hand of the Michelangelo painting – God reaching for us.

The image of the shepherd and the shepherd's crook suggests that we are pushed along and directed to the green pastures, to the *living* water, so that God's purposes may be fulfilled. One commentator puts it this way, "a good shepherd protects the sheep and agitates them as needed." Austin Crenshaw Shelley, *Christian Century*, March 30, 2016.

There is much broken-ness in our lives. That broken-ness moves us to research and pursue life-giving science and medicine. While there have been amazing advances, there remain many

illnesses, diseases which devastate and which we cannot cure. Children are born with deformities, disabilities; accidents maim and incapacitate. Drinking water becomes contaminated, global warming extends the pollen season and causes weather extremes; drug abuse, wars and guns – the list is endless. It seems broken-ness has always been so, even in the time of Jesus.

Who among us has not been touched by illness, disease, or loss?

Because of our broken-ness, we are drawn towards healing as a manifestation of God's presence in the world. That was true in the early church as well – Peter's *actions* such as healing Tabitha led many people to believe in the Lord. Jesus said on many occasions, 'your *faith* has made you well', e.g., Mt. 9:22, Luke 17:19, Mark 10:52.

Tabitha was a widow, living among a community of widows for whom she sewed clothes and ministered with compassion to those in need. She was, in Luke's account, a disciple. We should take note of that, Tabitha is the only woman in the New Testament described directly as a disciple. Luke uses the feminine form of the Greek word, so no mistake here.

For me, the story's emphasis is not on a return from death, but on the communal gathering of spiritual strength and resources to surround Tabitha. This group of women anointed Tabitha's body, laying her out in death. They prayed and interceded for her when she could not longer do so for herself. They summoned Peter, because they had confidence in the Good News. They had confidence in God's power.

What about Peter's faith? After he had heard their intercessions, he asked them to leave the room, then prayed silently. His simple statement – *Tabitha get up* – expresses his confidence in the Lord. He counted on God to do something right there and then. In faith, her life was raised.

The faith of the widows and the apostle Peter, the mysterious work of communal healing, gave witness to Jesus' presence. *He is risen* is life-giving works in Jesus' name that reveal his identity to the world.

Let's reflect together for a moment on members of the Christ Church community who ask for prayers, or give witness and thanks for the congregation's prayers. Consider the many ways in which the resources of this congregation are put towards the ministry of spiritual health and wholeness – not just in our Pastoral Care Circle and the Prayer Shawl ministry, but also in our day to day interactions as a community.

I recently heard the story of a young man with ALS - Lou Gehrig's disease. As he gradually became paralyzed, even to the point where he could use only his hands and voice, he volunteered daily at a social services center. There he spent the day talking on the phone with people who were despairing, in need of comfort or a good listener. His own life-giving endeavor to many gave witness to the new creation, to the Good News proclamation, *He is risen*.

Mutuality is indeed the story of Easter. The meaning and the proclamation of the Resurrection are in the life-giving works of people who come together seeking healing for the world.

I pray that we continue our work together to preserve, sustain and restore life.

Amen.

The Rev. Diane Ramerman
April 17, 2016