

Trinity Church
March 23, 2008

Easter Day
RCL, Year A, Easter Day

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

At the dawn of Christianity, John of Damascus wrote these words that Christians the world over continue to sing:

*Now let the heavens be joyful,
Let earth her song begin:
Let the broad world keep triumph,
And all that is therein.
For Christ the Lord is risen,
Our joy that has no end.*

Standing in the house of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion, Peter, the same Peter who ran to the tomb with such vigor on the morning of Resurrection, that same Peter tries to tell Cornelius and his household about the Jesus who is Lord of all. In his creed-like speech, Peter says, "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree;" and then Peter says the extraordinary words, "But God ..." But God raised him on the third day.

To endure the impact of Peter's extraordinary words, "But God ..." we must first look closely at ourselves. Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, writes, "What the events of Good Friday and Easter tell us is that every single human being is implicated in something profoundly wrong. There is only one innocent character in the drama [of Jesus; death and resurrection], and it isn't me or you. So, for all of us there is something in our lives that would, if it came to it, if it reigned unchecked in us, puts us with the crucifiers. We have contributed to the death of Jesus. He is there on the cross because we are the way we are." Archbishop Rowan's words are tragically and so profoundly true.

But today the stone is rolled back from this tomb of truth about our own sin, about our death, and Peter says the words that make all the difference: "But God ..." The resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate "But God ..." moment; Jesus' resurrection steps over every dead end of every attempt to make sense of our human condition, and every failed attempt to find purpose or hope within the sin and death of who we are. Jesus' resurrection steps into the blinding light of God's unimaginable love. "But God raised him on the third day ...," Peter says "... and allowed him to appear ... to us who were ... witnesses. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify." So, with Peter, I say to you: God has stepped over your sin and with Christ, raised you to newness of life. He has called you out of darkness into his own marvelous light. There is no place in your life, there is no moment, there is no predicament, there is no despairing in which God will not and has not already acted in love to draw you into resurrection and life. "But God ..." stands within and just beyond every step we take, every breath we take, everything we are and do. Despite everything, God, "But God ..." has acted to set us free. There is no asking why or how God has done this. All we can do is accept it, and give thanks.

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb expecting nothing except to tend the body of death in despair. The empty tomb and even the angels had no effect on her. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she turned from the tomb and saw Jesus standing there, she still could see nothing of the reality that surrounded her, even when he spoke to her. Only when Jesus speaks her name, speaks personally to her, is she drawn into

the “But God ...” that Peter wants you and me and Cornelius and his household to experience. Resurrection enfolded her in new life.

A personal encounter with the Risen Lord is the invitation which our celebration of Easter today extends to you. The Risen Jesus wants you to step beyond the proclamation of resurrection, or the possibility of resurrection, into Resurrection itself, in which you can only marvel in the reality of God’s love brilliantly present in the Risen Jesus. Jesus invites you to become with him and in him resurrection and life.

I know this is possible because it happened to me. I was young, in junior high school, and I was in church with my family for the Easter Day liturgy, and the service was festive and beautiful, just what you would expect. And I was praying along with everyone else. I opened my eyes, and there was a realization, so deep and personally real within me, of Resurrection and of Life, that I could see everyone and everything around me held in the glow of Christ’s Resurrection. The words were no longer mere words; that of which they spoke were profoundly and essentially real, true beyond truth, real beyond reality. It was a “But God ...” moment for me, and it has never left me to this day. It was for me newness of life. I know that the Risen Christ holds out that same experience in some way to you in order that you may life in the reality of Christ’s love, and be yourself a witness. Cornelius and his household believed. There are many here today who have come to live in Christ. So can you. For Christ the Lord is risen, our joy that has no end.