

The Peace of Christ

In our totally cool Wednesday morning Bible Study, we've been spending our time on the resurrection stories as told by each of the four Gospel writers.

And what comes up front and center every time is that none of the disciples remember that Jesus in fact told them ahead of time that he'd be back!

They heard it like we so often hear so much in church, oh, sure, the words entered our ears, but out they went just as fast.

We, they, hear, without really listening, without really understanding.

Which is why in these weeks of the Easter season, we go back to those same gospel lessons to hear Jesus telling us yet again what's going to happen after his grisly death, so that we might believe that what happened to Jesus will also happen to us one day!

That's where we are this morning with John's gospel.

It's the day before his arrest.

He's preparing his friends for what's coming — but they hear the words without really understanding.

He's going away, and will be back in ways we still can't wrap our heads around.

It will be the Spirit, like a mustard seed that sprouts and takes over the garden, like a measure of yeast that explodes a hundred pounds of flour, this Spirit will take the world, not by storm, but quietly, persistently, yet..... inevitably.

It is the Spirit getting loose in the world shaking up the existing order and our expectations this is called the peace of Christ....

What does the peace of Christ look like?

Maybe the best place to start is with the perilous journeys of St Paul, that fellow who just the other day is hunting down Christians and dragging them off to the clink — only to be knocked on his backside and blinded — all of which leads him to stand up and see the light!

Today, Paul's adventures begin with a vision...

His itinerary says it's time to go to Asia, but those plans are nixed by the Risen Lord, the world's first travel agent!

And in that role, Our Lord sends Paul a vision of a man from Macedonia.

Macedonia back then is a part of what is now Greece.

So Paul changes plans, gets with the new assignment, and begins a journey that would make old Jonah and his whale proud.

Paul's trip is like taking a small boat from Oahu to Maui (about 60 miles) in rough seas, then from Maui to the Big Island, (about 100 miles), then walking from Hilo to the top of Volcano; all of which he does with "great haste."

When Paul talks about "running the good race for Christ," he's not joking!

When he reaches the end of this exhausting trip, he goes looking for a Jewish synagogue and for the 10 men needed to make a quorum for the Sabbath prayer to begin.

But there is no synagogue, nor are there 10 Jewish men.

You might expect Paul to be mad or at least chagrined that all that hurried travel brings him not to a synagogue, nor to any men, but to a riverbank and a few women; gentile women at that.

But Paul is neither upset nor chagrined.

He is living within the peace of Christ, because Paul understands that to love Jesus is to do what Jesus does, even when it comes with hardship, even when it seems things aren't going as expected.

Because Jesus spares no effort for us; Jesus goes to every length for us and with us, and then even farther: and Jesus is chock full of surprises for those who take their chances with him.

So what does Paul do when things don't turn out as expected?

Let him tell you: "We sat down and spoke with the women."

What a way to live!

Just taking things as they come.

Trusting, as Blessed Julian says, that "all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well!"

Little does Paul know that on that riverbank sits the beginnings of the most faithful community the young church will ever know, the church at Philippi.

The Philippian church will soon support Paul's mission with money, prayers and deep friendship.

No wonder Paul later writes to them:

"My dear, dear friends, I love you so much!

I do want the very best for you.

You make me feel such joy, you fill me with such pride." Phil. 4:1 (The Message).

One of the women at the riverbank this morning is Lydia.

Funny how so many Christian denominations, including the Episcopal Church until the 1970's, exclude women from the ministry when in the early church, there are women all over the place in positions of leadership!

So here we are with Lydia, a woman selling purple cloth, the cloth of the well to do, the cloth of royalty.

She's probably pals with Beyoncé and Cher and even the Trumps!

But Lydia is also this:

A woman whose heart and mind are open to a radically new way to encounter life, to encounter God.

And because of this openness, she is the first European Christian.

She is, quite literally, the mother in faith of every European Christian.

Her legacy begins this morning, on a riverbank.

She says to Paul what Jesus says to us today: "Come, and stay at my home," as Lydia too enters into the peace of Christ.

So what does the peace of Christ mean to you?

How have you bumped into this peace, and how is it different from the peace offered by the Empire or Madison Avenue or financial security?

"Perhaps there are two view of Christ's peace.

Both agree that this world can be a topsy turvy place.

But one view says that when you come to faith, things settle down, the world stops shaking, everything makes sense.

That's the Prosperity Gospel, the Name It and Claim It crowd, the one's who say send in a \$1000 seed to Rev. Billy Bob and your life will be great!

The other view doesn't promise an end to the shake-ups but helps you keep your footing in the midst of the shaking.

I think that's what Jesus is talking about.

The Spirit he promises is called the Advocate -- the one who defends in the face of accusation -- and the Comforter -- the one who assures us that no matter the circumstances, all will be well.

Truth be told, Jesus isn't promising smooth sailing in this life -- in fact -- if you follow him, you may find more upheavals than you ever thought possible!

What he promises is peace -- not the end of difficulties, but confident expectation and hope.

It is Francis of Assisi who, when asked what he would do if he knew the world would end tomorrow, replies, "I'd plant a tree today."

That's not optimism, it's hope; not simply a lack of fear, but courage; not only the absence of disturbance, but peace -- the peace of Christ, a peace the world cannot give." David Lose, paraphrased.

I'll leave you with this:

One Sunday morning at a small southern church, the pastor calls on his old deacon to lead the opening prayer.

The deacon stands up, bows his head and says, "Lord, I hate buttermilk."

The pastor opens one eye and wonders where this is going...

The deacon continues, "Lord, I hate lard."

Now the pastor is totally lost.

The deacon continues, "Lord, I ain't too crazy about plain flour either.

But after you mix 'em all together and bake 'em in a hot oven, I really do love biscuits."

"Lord help us to realize when life gets hard, when things come up that we don't like, whenever we don't understand what You are doing, that we need to wait and see what You are making.

After you get through mixing and baking, it'll probably be something even better than biscuits. Amen.

+amen