

Easter III ***April 18, 2010***

I want to start with a word about Eastertide, and the reading we hear during these fifty days. In the early church, people were generally baptized at the Easter Vigil, after months or even years of preparation. But that time of preparation, called the catechumenate, was not what we would expect—it wasn't like our Inquirers' Class; it didn't talk much about things like sacraments, history, theology and the Prayer Book.

That stuff was left for later, for after Baptism, during these great fifty days of Eastertide. That time, which is now, was called the Mystagogium. This was when the mysteries and the meaning of the Christian faith and life were talked about specifically and in detail. The lessons that we hear as the Pascal Candle burns are still about this—they are still here to lead us deeper into the mystery of our lives as Baptized Christians.

The readings we just heard are very much in this tradition. They speak to the meaning of Easter, and of our baptism, at a level of depth that we can easily forget; and they remind us, just like they instructed the newly baptized so long ago, that, if we take what happened a couple of weeks back seriously, then all sorts of things just might change.

First, we hear the story of Paul's experience on the Road to Damascus. Here's Paul, as straight-laced and orthodox a pharisee as you could hope to find, out to make sure things stay the same and that the old-time religion is protected from any upset this new sect that talks about Jesus as the messiah might cause. He gets his letters, his official certificates, and sets out *to save the faith*. On his way to doing that, everything changed; Jesus' resurrection became so real that it smacked him right upside the head and literally knocked him off his feet. From that point on, everything was different, and a life and a career that had seemed set, settled, and off to a good start, were whisked away in an instant, and a brand-new adventure began.

The possibilities were suddenly endless, and Paul had no idea what the future would look like or where he would end up.

But there was no going back, and there was no way that things could ever be the same. What used to matter didn't matter any more; and what now mattered had to do with entering a life that was suddenly as mysterious and as perplexing as the vision that had grasped him. Everything was new.

Speaking of visions, we also get to hear a bit of the Book of Revelation this Eastertide, and, in hearing it, we get to be reminded of what a subversive little piece of writing it is. We're so familiar with this language about thrones and lambs and about how every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth sings that power and might and honor belong to the lamb—we are so familiar with this that we forget something that the first hearers of these words knew very well.

They knew very well that there was another throne to be reckoned with, one that had a very real, very live Emperor sitting on it—an Emperor who took quite seriously the notion that *he* was the one who deserved power and might and honor from just about everybody, just about everywhere—both on earth and in heaven. And the first hearers of these words knew very well that the crowd at Jesus' crucifixion spoke for just about everybody that mattered when it shouted "we have no king but Caesar."

So what *we* might consider a somewhat quaint image of a new throne and the lamb was, for them, a direct and a dangerous challenge to the way everyone else thought the world was put together; and it signaled very clearly that a new reality was afoot, and that new possibilities were in the air, and that the old ways of seeing everything from whose in charge here to what matters most in life, was now up for grabs.

These new ways might be uncertain, and they might even be dangerous, but there was no doubt in anyone's mind that they would not be dull. This simple image of a different throne was an audacious and seditious proclamation—the resurrection had happened, baptism had happened, and everything was going to be different.

And then there's Peter, bless his heart, who always seems to show up just in time to bring everything back down to ordinary, human terms. As this story tells it, after the resurrection, several of the disciples, for one reason or another, have left Jerusalem and gone home to Galilee—where things would be safe, and quiet, and ordinary again. Peter, who started out as a fisherman before all this Jesus business got in the way, decides to stick with what's familiar; and he goes fishing. Who knows, maybe they all had something in mind like “Peter and the Former Disciples Fresh Fish Emporium, Inc.” After all, resurrection or not, folks still had to work if they wanted to eat.

Jesus had something else in mind. Whatever else was going on with those mysterious 153 fish, it quickly became clear that they were not going to be startup capital for a new local business. Jesus had other fish to fry; and so, it turned out, did Peter. Peter wasn't that great a fisherman, and he had hardly excelled as a disciple, but now he was about to start something else, something new, something unknown, and, it turned out in the end, something downright lethal. He was going to stop catching his own fish, and he was going to start feeding Jesus' sheep.

The resurrection was real, and that meant things could never be the same for Peter, or for Paul, or for those who had discovered a different throne and a different Emperor. The world had changed; and that change mattered.

As St. Chrysostom reminds us every Easter Vigil, “Christ is risen, and the devils have fallen”. This means that the old, familiar obstacles are gone, and that new things are suddenly possible. Christ is risen, and folks who had made their peace with the way things were and always had been, found themselves drawn away from that comfortable existence into new ways of living—ways where adventures and faithfulness replaced complacency and safety. Who knows, it just might be time for that to happen, in one way or another, small or large, quiet or noisy, to some more folks even today, even here.

Christ is risen, and the mad scramble for the goodies of this world is shown to be empty and hollow—while such values as beauty, compassion, truth, even sacrifice and surrender, are strangely revealed as being the true way of life and of joy.

Christ is risen, so it just isn’t true anymore that whoever dies with the most toys, wins. Christ is risen, and there may well be some things of ours that need to join Paul’s letters, and Peter’s fish, and the worship of the Emperors of this world, in the dustbin of the past, and so free us to start off in a new direction.

Christ is risen, and anything is possible. Our past does not control us, and what has up until now been the only way to do, and to be, suddenly has a new light shining on it; and by that light, all of the glitter and glamour of the old ways may be shown to be cheap tinsel and flaking paint.

I don’t know for sure what this may mean in all of its particulars—not for me and certainly not for anybody else. But I do know that Christ is risen, that we are living in a new reality, and that anything is possible.