

THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
May 2, 2004 ~ All Saints Church, Pasadena ~ Susan Russell

I want to begin by sharing how deeply aware I am of the equal measures of privilege and challenge I bring with me into the pulpit this morning. It is an amazing privilege to be part of yet another historic Sunday at All Saints Church – a Sunday when it seems that we can actually reach out and touch a part of that oft described “arc of history that bends toward justice” as we welcome the new Bishop of New Hampshire into our worship and celebration. That’s the privilege part. The challenge part is the sure and certain knowledge that most of you would rather have him up here preaching this sermon. So there it is. And here we go.

On this Fourth Sunday of Easter I am reminded of when I was a day school chaplain – and just about every year about this time I would give the children in chapel a quiz that sounded something like this: “Let’s review boys and girls ... how many days are there in a year?” “How many days of Christmas?” “How many days in Lent?” “How many days in Easter?” And then I would tell them that there were indeed FIFTY days in the Easter season ... the fifty days between Easter and the Feast of Pentecost ... and I would also tell them that Chaplain Susan didn’t do 40 days of Lent to just do one day of Easter: so we’re celebrating all 50 of them!

It was true then and it’s true today. The Easter dress is at the cleaners, the last of the chocolate bunny and marshmallow Peeps have been nibbled out of the Easter basket and errant strands of that plastic Easter grass that seems to have no half life are finding their way into hiding places where they will attempt to elude my vacuum cleaner. But the celebration goes on. It’s still Easter and we proclaim together “Christ is risen; Christ is risen indeed” as Alleluias begin and end our worship – and we rejoice in the amazing Good News that we belong to a God calls us by name -- who loved us enough to become one of us – whose life, death and resurrection gives us new life – not just once, but over and over and over again. My favorite Easter card has these words on it:

The Great Easter truth
Is not that we will be born again someday
But that we are to be alive here and now
By the power of the resurrection

That great Easter truth is what we celebrate together this morning – that Easter doesn’t end when the Easter lily wilts and the Alleluias fade: it is instead that which enables us to be alive – here and now – each and every day – claiming the power of the resurrection – often in very unexpected ways.

It turns out it’s not always easy to recognize resurrection. We’ve been reading through the stories of the post-resurrection appearances Jesus made to the disciples in the Gospels and one of the most striking connection between all of them is that they didn’t know who he was at first. Mary thought he was the gardener, the disciples on the Road to Emmaus believed him a traveler who’d missed all the news of what had been going on in Jerusalem and last Sunday we heard the story of the disciples in the boat who at first thought him a stranger on the shore giving free fishing advice. “Christ had risen indeed” – but it took them awhile to figure it out. And maybe the best, greatest Good News of all is that we belong to a God who loves us enough to hang in with us while we figure it out, too.

When my son Jim was in kindergarten the week right before Easter was “Letter E” week and all the children had drawn pictures of an “E” word – pictures of Easter. I remember looking at the bulletin board on the wall where twenty pictures of Easter were proudly displayed -- of a green hill with three crosses ... some with flowers, a few with trespassing Easter bunnies ... nineteen of them alike but different in their best kindergarten way ... and then there was the twentieth. Down in the far, right hand corner ... the one without a cross or even a bunny in sight ... the one mostly green with a chunk of gray and a splash of yellow ... the one that said “Jamie Russell on it.” I know enough now to know that the right question to have asked would have been “Tell me about your picture, honey” – but I was a first-time mom and said instead (I’m embarrassed to admit) “I thought you were supposed to draw a picture of Easter, honey.” And he looked at me with a five-year-old version of ill-disguised disdain and said to me, “It IS a picture of Easter, Mom. Easter isn’t about crosses – it’s about the empty tomb.” And then I could see it – the green hill, the gray stone rolled away from it, the light coming out from it ... Christ is risen, indeed!

I was so locked into what I thought was supposed to be there – what I was conditioned to expect – that I couldn’t see what was really there. And that’s precisely the same boat the Temple authorities found themselves in this morning’s Gospel as they cross-examined Jesus asking, “Are you really the Messiah? If so, tell us plainly – don’t keep us in suspense.” He was there – right before their eyes – as clear as the kindergarten picture on the bulletin board was to me – but since he wasn’t what they expected they couldn’t see the new life he offered as he healed the sick and cured the lame ... couldn’t hear the new vision he shared of a kingdom that had already come, of a banquet where everyone was welcome at the table.

“The work I do in God’s name gives witness in my favor,” said Jesus. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” But they couldn’t hear his voice – it was drowned out by their own certainty that how it had always been was how it was meant to be and so they missed the chance to participate with God in doing a new thing.

Their challenge is our challenge, for we belong to a God for whom doing a new thing is really doing the same OLD thing – inviting us into relationship with God and with each other; calling us to love each other as God has loved us; asking us to trust that God’s mercy is wide enough, God’s love is broad enough to embrace us all – to trust the promise of what may be the favorite of all my favorite hymns:

For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind
And the heart of the eternal is most wonderfully kind
If our love were but more faithful we should take him at his word
And our lives would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.

This God whose very nature is love will not rest until we finally take him at his word – until we finally “get it” – until there isn’t a single stranger left at the gate, a single creature on earth who doesn’t hear the voice of their creator and know that they are loved – even if that voice comes through a source as unexpected to some as a rabbi from Nazareth or a bishop from New Hampshire.

One of the challenges of preaching from this pulpit is hearing the echoes of the prophetic voices who have stood here through the decades – following in the footsteps of such preaching giants as George Regas and Ed Bacon is not to be taken lightly.

But one of the advantages is being able to learn from their example – and one of the things I learned from BOTH of them is that any story worth telling was worth RE-telling ... and so I have one more story I want to tell: one I know I have used here at All Saints before but one that I re-tell happily this morning – a story that comes from Robert Fulghum of “Everything I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten” fame:

Giants, Wizards, and Dwarfs was the game to play. Being left in charge of about 80 children 7 to 10 years old while their parents were off doing parenty things, I mustered my troops in the parish hall and explained the game. It's a large-scale version of Rock, Paper, and Scissors, and involves some intellectual decision-making. But the real purpose of the game is to make a lot of noise and run around chasing people until nobody know which side your are on or who won.

Organizing a roomful of grade-schoolers into two teams, explaining the rudiments of the game, achieving consensus on group identity -- all this was no mean accomplishment, but we did it with a right good will and were ready to go.

The excitement of the chase had reached a critical mass. I yelled out, “You have to decide now which you are: a GIANT, a WIZARD, or a DWARF”.

While the groups huddled in frenzied, whispered consultation, a tug came at my pant leg. A small child stands there, looking up, and asks in a small concerned voice, “Where do the Mermaids stand?”

A long pause. A very long pause. “Where do the Mermaids stand?” I say. “Yes, you see, I am a Mermaid.” “There are no such things as Mermaids.” “Oh yes there is, I am one!”

She did not relate to being a Giant, a Wizard, or a Dwarf. She knew her category – Mermaid – and was not about to leave the game and go over and stand against the wall where the loser would stand. She intended to participate, wherever Mermaids fit into the scheme of things, without giving up dignity or identity. She took it for granted that there was a place for mermaids and that I would know just where.

Well, where DO the Mermaids stand? All the Mermaids – all those who are different, who do not fit the norm, and who do not accept the available boxes and pigeonholes? Answer that question and you can build a school, a nation or a kingdom on it.

What was my answer at the moment? Every once in a while I say the right thing. “The Mermaid stands right here, by the King of the Sea!” So we stood there, hand in hand, while the Wizards and Dwarfs and Giants rolled by in wild disarray. It is not true, by the way, that Mermaids do not exist. I know at least one personally. I have held her hand.

And so have I – so have we. We have held the hand of more than one of those who have come to this great church of ours – having heard the voice of the shepherd who loves them in a most unexpected way: on CNN and Fox News – in the historic actions of our General Convention – in the election of a gay bishop – in the recognition that their relationships are blessed by God and by this church. They have come – asking, seeking – wondering if they were truly welcome – if there was really a place for them to stand. And we have seen the joy and amazement on their faces when they find there is not only a place to stand but there is a community to stand with them ... where they are welcome and invited guests. Where Mermaids stand with Giants, Wizards and Dwarfs – and where the table is spread and the love overflows for them all. That is

the Good News we are proclaiming. That is the blessing we are claiming: the wideness of God's love and mercy that includes all, embraces all, and most importantly perhaps, empowers all – to go out and share that love with a world in such desperate need of its healing grace and power.

And may the God of love who has given us this vision of a world of welcome, love and justice give us also the grace and power to accomplish it. Amen.