

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Sermon preached by the Rev. Catherine R. Powell

Happy Easter! Isn't it wonderful to be together in this beautiful place on this wonderful day!

Early this morning we had an Easter vigil service on the beach. Two boys were baptized, aged 2 and 8. I met with the eight year old, Thomas, to help him get ready for his baptism. I told him he could make the promises himself but he might also want a godparent. Did he know what a godparent was? Oh yes, Thomas said, "I've ready *Harry Potter*." Harry does have a very good godfather. I told Thomas that he would be promising to say no to evil and yes to Jesus. Did he know what evil was? Oh yes, he said, "I've read *Harry Potter*." I thought of the character Voldemort who pretty much sums up evil. *Harry Potter* worked out to be a pretty good catechism!

Out on the beach we watched the beautiful daybreak as we celebrated the resurrection. The great big red ball of the sun seemed to float up over the horizon out of the clouds. Annie Dillard, the mystical nature writer who is also quite religious, once wrote about the sun. Isn't it amazing, she said, that the sun is so necessary to all life—without it we couldn't live--and yet we can't look at it. We can't take it in. Dillard suggested that the same was true of God. God underlies everything that is; God is the source of all; yet we cannot look directly at God. We can only see the evidence of God and catch glances out of the corner of our eyes.

This truth about the sun and about God also applies to Christ's resurrection. The resurrection is of central importance to our faith and yet we can't look directly at it; we can't see it clearly; we have terrible trouble putting it into words.

Even the first disciples couldn't express it clearly. Their varying accounts of the empty tomb reveal them as overwhelmed and tongue-tied. They vary in their reports of who went to the tomb—was it Mary? Two women? Three? Was it Peter and John, racing? They vary in their report of the first thing the visitors saw—was it a wide open door? Was it a heavy stone which was then rolled away by an earthquake? Was there a young man there? Two gleaming men? Or did two angels come down from the heavens? Did the witnesses run away in fear? Did they carry a report but were not believed? Was there fear or was there joy? Clearly the experience of the empty tomb and the realization that Christ was risen was not a simple newspaper report type of thing. What the gospel writers agree on is an empty tomb and a growing understanding that Jesus was not dead and gone. What they agree on is confusion and fear gradually shifting to hope, faith, and joy.

Easter is not about forcing ourselves to believe impossible things (or about denying suffering as we force ourselves to be joyful). Easter is about choosing which story, which truths, will be the guide our lives.

As Christians we don't have to be able to explain the resurrection or articulate our faith perfectly. We don't have to say it in the way someone else dictates. We just have to commit ourselves to a way of life that we believe brings life, the way of Jesus. We have to trust, again and again, the life-giving presence of Christ. That's what we're promising to do when we're baptized or when we stand up and renew the vows of our baptism.

Years ago, a mother came to me about baptism for her young daughter who was going on a trip. She was honest in saying that church meant little to her but that she just felt that maybe baptism would be kind of an insurance policy with God. I explained to her that God already loved the little girl and that baptismal promises are not like getting a ticket stamped so you can get into heaven. Baptism is a beginning. It is the beginning of a life following the Jesus who like a seed seemed small and unimportant, who like a seed looked dead and buried in the ground, who like a seed burst forth with life, life that passed on more life, and more life, and more.

Today we reaffirm our belief in that life. Let us now renew the baptismal promises that remind us what it means to be an Easter people, the ones who by our own choice follow a living Christ.