

### **We are witnesses**

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Third Sunday after Easter, April 19, 2015..

*You are witnesses of these things. Luke 24:48*

The wondrous mystery of Easter is central to our faith as the empty cross and the empty tomb define who we are. The disciples don't recognize the risen Christ until they encounter him in the familiar context by the lakeside. They are startled and even frightened because they think they are seeing an apparition. Not until he speaks to them and shows them the marks in his hands and his side and invites them to touch him do they believe his presence. Only then do they realize that they are witnessing first hand the evidence of his resurrection.

When Jesus asks them for something to eat they offer him is a piece of broiled fish. It takes something as ordinary as food for them to focus on the reality of his presence in their midst. This simple sharing of food is a foretelling of how we recognize Jesus in the sharing of the bread and wine in this great sacrament of the Eucharist. Our minds are opened to know him in this feast of remembrance.

As real as Christ is in that moment, they also realize that he is somehow no longer subject to earthly human limitations. He appears familiar to them at times and unrecognizable at other times. Of the ten different occasions in which the risen Christ appears to his disciples, this is the most vivid of all.

Down through the ages skeptics and scholars have tried to analyze the mystery of the appearances of the risen Christ. At some point we have to do as the disciples did and stop wondering how it happened and get on with the task of being the church. Christ's presence among us means that we no longer need to live in fear of anything. If those frightened souls were transformed into being courageous and brave enough to face unspeakable persecution, we can face any opposition for what we believe. In a compromised moral system, only the power of the resurrection gives us the courage to stand by our convictions.

Given what it took for those in the early church to turn from fear to witnessing boldly for Christ, we have to ask what it takes for us to stand up for what we believe. Can such a power work a change in us as it did in them? Of course it can! Belief in personal resurrection power has changed countless lives around the world and across the centuries. Just this past week we saw those how those who have recovered from the marathon bombings have gotten on with their lives. Such an enduring strength of faith bears witness to how what at first might seem impossible can become possible. Countless souls have worked against tremendous odds working together to survive.

Let me share with you two examples of efforts at survival. Both happened in the fall of 1942. The first was the tragedy at the Coconut Grove nightclub in Boston when a fire broke out and spread quickly in the very crowded lounge. As panic ensued, in their rush for the exits patrons found some of the doors were locked. Other exits had doors that opened inward, hindering those trying to get out. Bodies piled up in the revolving door at the front exit prevented others from getting out. In the space of just twelve minutes four hundred and ninety souls perished, mostly from smoke inhalation. The lessons learned from that tragic fire brought about changes in public safety laws regarding flammable materials in public places and requiring exit doors to open outward.

The other story of survival is about five World War II flyers in the Army Air Corps who had to ditch their disabled flying fortress in the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean. The ranking officer took command and organized them to use survival tactics. The first thing they did was to lash the rubber rafts together. They caught rainwater in containers and were able to snatch fish and seagulls for nourishment. They prayed, read the Bible and sang hymns. They were sustained by their will to survive as they were tossed about in that watery expanse. They spent three long weeks out on the open sea enduring the shark-infested waters in the burning sun and grueling heat before they were eventually rescued from their ordeal. They learned what it really means to be saved. Their story was recorded by one of the survivors in a book entitled *We Thought We Heard the Angels Sing*.

Few of us have so dramatic a story to tell, but it illustrates how resurrection power works in a crisis when people work

together. Resurrection power becomes real when we set our priorities and values in order. How we move forward as the church in an increasingly secular age depends upon setting our priorities and our focus on the essentials. Dealing with the basics means that what was thought important has little significance and what was thought to be of little consequence takes on greater importance.

Here at Emmanuel Church, you have boldly committed yourselves to keeping this a viable and vital parish church. There may have been those who wondered if we could survive with minimal human and financial resources, but we joined hands to form a strong bond to go against the odds. We have moved from surviving to serving, from maintenance to mission. We can feel good about what has been accomplished, but there is more work to be done in doing effective ministry together. Going forward in faith requires making possible what was thought to be impossible. I'm not sure I can explain how resurrection power works, but if everything could be explained in this life, we would have no need for faith. What is important is that resurrection power has changed the lives of countless generations. It enables us when we feel backed up against a wall to stand for what is right and good and loving.

When resurrection power is at work in us, the love of God in Christ overpowers evil, overrides falsehood and conquers negativity. Instead of using might to make right, it works the other way around with right making might. Greater than gaining understanding through the intellect is how we gain faith through our heart. When Jesus tells his disciples that they are witnesses of these things, ask yourself that if you were called on to give testimony for what you believe, would you know what to say? Or would you come up with something after it was too late? If we are faithful in knowing Christ and making him known, it is no exaggeration to say that we can change the shape of the world.