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Easter 4 – Year B

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We will see Jesus. If you have followed even in a most cursory manner what I have been saying lately, you know that for the duration of my time as your bishop, you are likely to hear repeatedly that we will see Jesus. It is as good an Easter season proclamation as is “Alleluia. Christ is risen.” After all, the disciples in first century Palestine would not have had such a proclamation had they not seen the risen Christ. And neither do disciples today. When we proclaim with any confidence that Christ is risen, it is because we know as well what it is like to see the risen Christ. We see the gardener, the hitchhiker on the road, or someone in the midst of the locked room of an impossible situation, and we “get it” that the encounter can be holy. Think of such situations in your own life. New ways of looking at people and situations change us. But don't worry if the sightings are few and far between; we never totally “get it.” Perhaps only the mystics do who tell us of their visions of God, and many of them had very long, dark nights when they could see nothing. Remember that sometimes we see Jesus but simply are not able to recognize clearly the risen Christ.

And thus it is that we come to today's lesson from the book of Acts. In this lesson Peter and John stand before the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Our prejudice as Christians from a two thousand year old tradition is to hold up the disciples-turned-apostles as the good guys and the traditional religious leaders as the bad guys who are malevolent toward this nascent Christianity. But I want to give those religious leaders a break. They are important to the story and come as close as Peter and John—or you and I—to understanding the good news.

The background to the event is that Peter and John have gone up to the Temple in Jerusalem to pray, and while there come upon a crippled beggar who is healed in that encounter. You may remember the story if for no other reason than its most famous quote as the King James Version states it, “Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk.” It has been a convenient proof text ever since when we decline to give money to beggars.

What happens when Peter and John are arrested is that the religious leaders, far from being stupid, hit the nail on the head. You and I might concentrate on asking how a healing takes place, as we are wont to do in the church when we mistakenly try to answer religious questions with scientific solutions. All those questions about how miracles occur. Were bones miraculously straightened? Was he simply unsure of himself until someone encouraged him? Or whatever?

But the religious leaders get it. They admit that they are worried about what it means to proclaim, “In Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.” They are not worried about the miracle of resuscitation or the miracle of a crippled person walking. They are worried about how everything is changed when people begin to see Jesus.

And so should we. And so should the leaders of this church, this state, this nation, and any corporation, for that matter. When we start to see Jesus the world will become a different place.

Here is why those religious leaders are worried and ask their questions. When we start to see the risen Christ in others we have no other option than to start treating them as “holy,” as more than subordinates. There is no longer the power to control others as if they are less important than we. Having been on the inside of the church about as much as a person can be, I know that we religious leaders like our power to control. Bishops like it and priests like it and vestries like it and even altar guilds like it.

When we start to see the risen Christ in others, what we want becomes less important than what we can do to in order to make Jesus feel welcome. It is why churches are called to be outwardly focused. We in this western culture are so amazingly self-absorbed. We see it in our political struggles as each group vies for its own self-interest. Seeing Jesus changes how we see the world and our neighbor.

When we start to see the risen Christ in others, we become concerned for generations yet unborn. The people who come after us are as important as we are. I suspect that there would not be nearly the amount of pollution of our environment occurring if we would see Jesus in the faces of great grandchildren not yet born.

And when we start to see the risen Christ in ourselves, we no longer have to depend on self-destructive behavior that we so often engage in because we feel so bad about who we are. Trust me on this one: There are entire industries making a fortune off of how bad we feel about ourselves. Seeing Jesus will have economic consequences.

Those religious leaders in first century Palestine knew they had a hot potato in their hands. People who see Jesus begin to act and live healthily. People who see Jesus begin to make decisions based on the welfare of others and not simply of self. People who see Jesus begin to value relationship over estrangement, value peace over war. All those sightings of Jesus will upset the status quo.

Our good news from this? If the religious leaders of 2000 years ago understood the power of resurrection to turn the world upside down, just think what can happen today when we begin to understand it. We Christians are a people who are supposed to be all about resurrection. We are called to stop focusing on the smaller issues of how miracles might take place and to start focusing on the bigger issue of what resurrection will mean in our lives. We are going to start seeing Jesus. We are just like those religious leaders of first century Palestine because deep down inside ourselves we know that seeing the risen Christ will change everything.

Our call is to live into what we believe, live into what we trust. If we trust that God’s love is so strong that it can overcome death, then it can overcome all our petty differences, all our prejudices, all our failings to see what is holy in others. Start talking living like that, and I can assure you that we are going to scare anyone who loves the status quo. For us Christians, we see everything in the new light of God’s love. And that vision ought to scare anyone who is living comfortably off the feeding on insecurities or hatreds or any of the thousand other diseases that afflict this world in 2012. We will see Jesus. To do so will make all things new. Amen.