

We enter, friends, into a sacred moment. As we gather this morning, the words of a song come to me:

By night, we hasten, in darkness,
to search for living water.
Only our thirst leads us onward,
only our thirst leads us onward.

We thirst for the living water of Christ my brothers and sisters. It is on this day that we celebrate His victory over death, His return to life, and the grace that has been poured out for us, for the forgiveness of sins. Let me tell you a story from years ago.

The snow was coming down at an annoying rate. It was a blizzard, but only a mediocre one. It wasn't snowing with enough intensity to keep me off the roads, but it was at that level where I needed to be fully present in my driving. No letting my thoughts drift, no listening to the radio – what was required was total focus.

This was particularly true given the circumstances, and I don't simply mean the weather. I was following someone. Furthermore, I was following them to somewhere I had never been before, in an area I wasn't very familiar with. Plus it was at night. As long as I stayed behind them, however, everything should be fine. They lead, I follow.

Then it happened. During one of those points where lanes merge, a vehicle moved in between us. And it wasn't a small car either, but a rather good-sized truck. I couldn't see the other car at all. I was leaderless. As my grip on the steering wheel tightened I felt different emotions start to wrestle for my attention: annoyance, trepidation, worry, frustration. The prevailing mood of safety I'd had while following the other car was gone, replaced with a roiling mix of rather unsatisfactory feelings. If only I had printed out the map and directions!

And this, by the way, was before all our phones had GPS.

Thinking back on that night in the snow reminds me of our spiritual journeys. And of course, when I say our spiritual journeys, I mean our lives. That is, after all, what our lives really are. As we each continue on that journey, simply following our spiritual leader is not enough. It's not enough to go to church and listen to what the priest has to say (regardless of how handsome and articulate they may be...). It's a very good idea, but it is not enough. Something could block your view. Something could get in the way between you and your spiritual leader, leaving you in as flummoxed a state as I was on that road.

And this idea should make sense to us. After all, as good Episcopalians we are aware of how important and empowered the laity are meant to be. In other words all of us, not just the clergy, have a connection to God. Our salvation and our walk with the Lord are not determined by our spiritual leader. Our clergy and other spiritual leaders are of course important and useful guides. Their ministrations can help us to stay focused and to stay in the right direction on our journeys. They have been set apart by God for just such a task (and let there be no mistake, I too have spiritual leaders. I may stand before you, but I also have spiritual leaders who guide me). But luckily for us in addition to giving us a car to follow on our spiritual journey, God has also printed out the map and directions.

Consider our scripture lesson today from the Book of Acts. Leading up to our reading Peter has had a vision and received prompting from the Holy Spirit. He was called upon to visit the Roman centurion Cornelius, and to bring to him and his associates the Gospel message. With this the spreading of the good news to the Gentiles was begun.

It is easy to lose sight of what a momentous occasion this was. Up until this point the

apostles had still been entrenched in the particular Jewish-ness of their experience with Jesus. Jesus himself was a Jew; indeed, he was the Messiah – their Messiah! Why *should* this news be spread to the Gentiles? They had not kept the Law. They were not the chosen people of the nation of Israel. They did not read the Scriptures. God did not covenant with them over so very many generations. How is it that Jesus came for *them*?

Peter needed to look past all of that. He had to turn away from his cultural context and put his faith in the vision provided by God, and in the prompting of the Holy Spirit. I can't help but wonder what must have been going through his mind, or if his heart was pounding, as he crossed the threshold into Cornelius' home – an act that would have been inconceivable just a couple of days before.

What Peter presents to these Gentiles is the roadmap for their spiritual journeys. He gives them the truth of salvation and how to get there. Let's see what Peter offers up:

He begins by pointing out that God shows no partiality. This is the call to the Gentiles, affirming for them (and for us) that Christianity is not to be a Jews-only club. This speaks loudly through the lens of our modern times. God has not set apart the Christians as the only people of importance or as the only ones who have access to God's ever-abundant grace. We are ALL children of God, and God indeed shows no partiality.

Peter then recounts the story of Jesus' baptism, ministry, and death on a cross. Today when the name 'Jesus' is mentioned, in most of the world there is a pretty good chance that people know who you're talking about and what his story is. But in ancient Palestine there was no Internet and there was no CNN. There was no news radio, and there was no newspaper. Word of mouth was the fastest way that information could get from point A to point B. It was

the rumor mill, with all the inconsistencies and flaws that go along with that. Given these limitations, if someone knew who this Jesus fellow was, they probably didn't have one single authoritative story of his life. "I hear he was a fisherman! No, he was a carpenter, but he hung out with fisherman. Wasn't he from Galilee? I heard Nazareth! I heard Bethlehem!" Peter was providing the outline of the life of Jesus, to either inform the Gentiles or to replace rumor with witness.

Now, by this point in the sermon there may be a few of you who are getting suspicious. "Hey, wait just a minute! This is Easter! Where's all the talk about the resurrection? Where's all the talk about a new life in Christ? And why aren't you preaching from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John? Just what is it that you're trying to pull here, anyway?" To those people I say 'Let not your heart be troubled.' For as we see, Peter is now getting around to the good stuff.

Verse 40 tells us "but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear". And there we have it – the resurrection. It is the indispensable portion of our faith roadmap. If Jesus had lived his life, preached his ministry, given us sound moral advice, and remained dead – then absolutely nothing would have been accomplished. For if that were so then we would all simply be living the best life we could, couched in the depressing knowledge that there is no respite or reward but death. We would be struggling daily through the fact of a world where bad things happen to good people, good things happen to bad people, and the tax man cometh – all without a shred of hope for something more. But through the resurrection Jesus defeated death and has given us the promise of a new life.

Don't get me wrong. We will all die. It is inevitable. Our body, this flesh, does not go on forever. The pandemic we are living through right now is a grim reminder of that brutal truth.

But that process is not something to be feared. Rather it is something we should be at peace with. Indeed, the imminence of death can be a sacred time, where the fullness of relationship and being may be experienced. Our mortality, in all its pains and joys, is what defines us. We are very mortal, and must not lose sight of that. Yet because of the resurrection, death itself does not have to be feared. The resurrection gives us assurance.

And so we are able to take up our call, not because we look to the reward like its some kind of cosmic ‘carrot and stick’ scenario (if only I live as I’m supposed to, I’ll be rewarded in heaven!), but because we have ALREADY been rewarded. God has already done the hard part through the revelation of his Son, Jesus the Christ. All that is left, as I said, is for us to take up our call.

It is to that call that Peter next turns. In verses 42 he teaches that we are called to preach to the people and testify that Jesus is ordained by God, and verse 43 tells us what to include in that preaching: that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

There, brothers and sisters in Christ, is the map and directions for our spiritual journeys. Keep them close. Carry them in your heart. Know...not think...not hope...not academically ponder...but KNOW that you are a child of God and have been given a new life through Jesus Christ the Son. By all means continue to follow the guidance of your spiritual leaders. That car is out ahead of you for a reason. But there will be times when your vision is obscured. There will be times when you can’t see the car you are trying to follow. You may in those times be tempted by annoyance, trepidation, worry, frustration, despair, or plain old fear.

Now, when we are physically separated from each other, may be one of those times.

Now, when our homes can feel more like tombs, and the distance between Good Friday and Easter morning has stretched to months long, may be one of those times.

But let me urge you to fear not. For you have the roadmap. God has provided you with the resources you need to find your way. Alleluia and Amen!