

Easter
Holy Comforter Church
The Rev. John E. Shields
April 4, 2010

One of the first things that I thought of after reading today's gospel was Liberace. You see, during a sabbatical several years ago, we went to Las Vegas. O yeah, I know you are supposed to go to a monastery and pray or sequester yourself in a library and write a book when you go on sabbatical. Well I actually did some very spiritual things – but on my way to one of them we stopped off in Las Vegas. While there we visited the Liberace Museum.

I can see it in your faces: Liberace? “He’s loosing it. We were afraid it would happen and it has! Liberace? The gospel?

What made me think of Liberace (by the way for everyone under 50 --- Liberace was a very famous and flamboyant pianist and TV star in the sixties and seventies --- he died in 1987.)

Liberace was the most flamboyant, over the top, dresser in show business --- or any other business for that matter. The Liberace Museum has many of his outfits on display and some are literally ‘dazzling’ --- sequins, rhinestones, feathers --- dazzling!

Dazzling! That is the connection --- “They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified...”

Two men in dazzling clothes appear in the empty tomb this morning. We do not know what they are wearing, but it must have been pretty bright.

The women disciples, who had never abandoned Jesus, these women who are Jesus' most faithful disciples, have come to anoint his body for burial, as was the custom.

We can only imagine the anticipation of these faithful women. We can only imagine the sadness and sorrow they are feeling as they make their way to the tomb.

We can only imagine the conversation they might be having.

Are they talking about how wonderful it had been when Jesus taught them? Are they recalling with sadness having lost this man who treated them as no other person had ever done – who gave them a dignity and personhood not usually granted to females of their day?

Are they recalling the horrible events of the week just past? Are they sharing bitterness at having lost this beloved teacher and friend? Are they discussing how he had borne the shame and suffering of the cross --- while at the same time forgiving those who were carrying out his capital punishment.

We can only speculate, can we not, as to the nature of this conversation? Surely it must have been a time of remembering, probably with many tears, a time of anguish, a time of despair – surely theirs was a holy and profound grief.

And so it is in this state of grief, anxiety, and anticipation that Jesus' followers arrive at his tomb.

They are immediately shocked to see the stone is rolled away and the tomb is open! This probably only adds to the despair they are already feeling. But now, they are shocked --- the text says, “Terrified!”

The body of Jesus is not there! Two men in ‘dazzling clothes’ appear and ask them this question: “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

The women do not understand (who would?) But later they will see and hear and know that the Lord, Christ Jesus has risen.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

That is the way the ‘dazzling guys’ introduce these disciples to the most incredible news of all --- “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.”

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

That is sort of a wise guy kind of question isn’t it?

It is almost sarcastic -- I mean they know the answer. At best it is rhetorical.

But isn’t it the right question: “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

It is the right question now, just as it was then.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

So may I ask you this morning: “Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

Why is it we so often seek life from the very things that bring about death?

We think that life can be found in power and status. Yet when we get it, we spend our time worrying about how to keep it or even get even more.

We think life can be found in money. Yet we never seem to have enough, no matter how much we have. And, as many of you know, we often discover that we would gladly give every thing we have for good health again.

Many times, when we are bored, depressed or just discontented, we think that life can be found in drugs and alcohol --- we confuse life with excitement and getting high.

Sometimes, for the same reasons, we think that life can be found in illicit relationships.

“Why are you looking for the living among the dead?”

I am afraid that too many of us actually would leave Jesus in the tomb. We think that Easter is really about his crucifixion and suffering -- that the emphasis is on Jesus’ shame and death.

Oh, I know we say we believe in the resurrection.

We say that we believe that Jesus was raised and that at some point in the future --- if we believe in him we will join him in the hereafter.

But when it comes to living our lives, we find ourselves in life situations that are death dealing -- not life giving. We find ourselves trapped in the success of our own pursuits, but they do not give us life and joy.

Noyes Capehart is an artist of some renown. He taught at Appalachian for years. He has works of art hanging in galleries all over the country. In the last year or so he was featured in a program on UNC –TV. Noyes is also an Episcopalian. A few years ago, he produced a series of black and white woodcuts for the Stations of the Cross.

In this series of 14 paintings, the artist uses the crown of thorns in a variety of ways. In the very last picture – the fourteenth station of the cross – Jesus is placed in the tomb. The artist has the crown of thorns stretched across the bottom of the picture. It looks like a barbed wire fence and everyone in the picture is imprisoned behind it.

Indeed that is our status without the resurrection of Jesus from the dead --- we are trapped behind the barbed wire fence of our own making through seeking life among the deadness of our sin.

The good news this morning --- is that resurrection happens --- God loves you --- good people ---and YES I am going to say it again – God loves you and there is nothing you can do to make God stop loving you. That’s right, the maker, creator, and sustainer of the very universe – the one who knows the very hairs on your head --- (or where they used to be for some of you.) --- loves YOU!

There is no tomb which you have created by your sin that cannot be opened by the power of Jesus’ love.

It seems to me that Christ comes to us in our weakness not our strength.

Christ comes to us in our need, not in our self-sufficiency.

Christ comes to us in our pain and uncertainty not our control and domination.

Christ comes us in our humility, not our arrogance.

Christ comes to us in our poverty of spirit – not the riches of our bank accounts.

Christ is risen in the healing touch of a friend.

Christ is risen in the call of comfort.

Christ is risen – everyday -- in the hearts of those who will create a space for him.

Just like the folks in the story we are often in the dark, nevertheless we come and nevertheless, Jesus comes to us.

We only have to be willing to see and experience his resurrection in our lives and the lives of those around us.

We are here today because these people experienced the risen Christ and they told one another about it.

There is no deed you have done that is so awful that God is not big enough to forgive.

Resurrection happens.

There is no place you have gone --- spiritually, psychologically or otherwise that is so dark or desperate that the light of Christ cannot illumine.

Resurrection happens.

Resurrection happens everyday.

It is not a once and for all thing --- it is an everyday thing.

Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Life is not to be found there but rather it is found in him who is raised.

Yes, beloved, Resurrection happens --- and it is dazzling!