

We're defined by our experience of the Resurrection

A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.

Easter, 2005. (Text: Acts 10:34-43)

In the years after the resurrection of Jesus, his followers spread out from Jerusalem. As they went, they shared their memory of the things their Master had said and done. But what impelled them to talk the most was their experience of his Resurrection.

A dear lady down in Florida told me something 27 years ago that I've never forgotten. She said, "***A person with an experience is never at the mercy of somebody who just has an argument.***" I've come to know that this is true. And that's what this sermon is about.

The first followers of Jesus were all Jews. Their fellow Jews ultimately came to despise them as blasphemers and expelled them from their synagogues. Gentile enemies either mocked them or flogged them. Sometimes they stoned them and left them for dead. —Just read the Book of Acts for details.

Some people – more of them gentiles than Jews – became Christians but later fell away because the personal cost of being a follower of Jesus was too great. Nevertheless, the number of Christians grew steadily, in spite of hostility from the synagogue, rejection by family members, persecution by the Roman government, and harassment by pagan neighbors who thought the Christians were just "too different."

It's logical to ask the question "*Why?*" What made Christianity grow in popularity when it was so risky to be a Christian? And the answer to that question is the *same* reason that brings millions of people to churches all around the world on Easter Day. You can find it in the portions of the New Testament we just read this morning. The answer is this: it's their experience of the Risen Christ!

Their experience of meeting the Risen Christ made Peter and the other apostles bold and fearless. It transformed them. Encounter with the Lord after he had risen from the dead became the foundation of their lives. The changed lives of people like Peter and Paul and their willingness to die rather than deny their faith in Jesus is one of the primary pieces of evidence for the credibility of the resurrection. There is simply no evidence of people ever accepting death or persecution for the sake of something they *knew* to be false. If Jesus had not died and risen again, there would be no Christianity today.

I ask you:

Do you believe in the resurrection of Christ? And, if you do, has that belief made a difference in your life?

I do. And it has.

Today we heard about Peter speaking of Christ to some gentiles. He told them that God had chosen him to be one of the witnesses who met Jesus after he was raised from the dead. I'm a witness too, and on this Resurrection Day I want to tell you my story.

When I left grad school and went to seminary, I had my sights set on being a church history teacher. I was career-focused. I had a plan for my life, and I was working my plan. The priesthood was part of that plan, but only as an adjunct to my academic profession. I didn't want to work in a parish, not ever. And I had no interest in preaching. I was comfortable in a lecture room, but uneasy in a pulpit —mostly (I know now) because I had nothing to preach!

I was a philosophical rationalist. Though I studied Greek in college and focused my seminary studies on the New Testament, the Bible was mainly a subject of academic interest. I was a historian, and I was on the "quest for the historical Jesus." I entertained serious doubt about whether the gospel stories of Jesus' resurrection were anything more than that —just stories.

In November of 1972 came the time for my ordination as a priest. I saw that as just another step on the way to the fulfillment of my ivory-tower career plan. During the ordination service, as I was kneeling on the floor of the seminary chapel with the hands of the Bishop and priests on my head, *I suddenly heard a "Voice" speaking to me.* I'd always mocked people who claimed to "hear the Lord," so this was a shocking and unexpected experience. The Voice that was speaking in my head drowned out the voice of the Bishop. It said, "*Until now you have done what*

you wanted to do. Hereafter, you shall do what I want you to do!” —It made the hair stand up on the back of my neck.

I was stunned. The experience rocked me. It shook my intellectual foundations. I didn't believe in things like that! I thought people who heard voices were mentally ill. But I was quite mentally sound, and I was having an experience I couldn't explain. —After that day, my life changed. I began to read the Bible differently. Instead of reading Scripture in order to have grist for academic debates, I began to read in order to hear God.

Six weeks later, I was back in Texas visiting my family for Christmas and attending my home parish. The rector there had the flu, so he asked if I wanted to fill in for him at services on the Sunday after Christmas. I jumped at the chance.

Preaching didn't wasn't comfortable for me, so I worked extra hard on my sermon —just the second since ordination. I don't know if what I said made much sense to the sparse congregation in church that Sunday after Christmas, but I can remember how deeply the assigned gospel spoke to me. It was “the prologue to John.” You know the passage. It begins, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”* And it goes on to say *“...He came to his own people, and his own people received him not. But to those who received him, who believed on his name, he gave power to become the children of God.”*

As I drove back to my parents' house after church, I was still thinking about that gospel... about how much it resonated with my recent experience. I was sitting in the car at a red light, just feeling happy and peaceful, when suddenly it happened —I heard the Voice again. Only this time it was laughing, like someone suppressing a chuckle as he spoke. He said, *“Yes. It's true. My gospel is true. And behold, I am alive forever more!”*

Tears began to run down my cheeks. And I sat there at the traffic light, crying, as the signal changed from red to green and cars honked and drove around me. I collected myself and drove on towards my parents' house. But I hadn't gone half a mile before I had rationalized the whole thing. I said to myself: “I've just had an emotional experience, nothing more. These were just echoes of my own thoughts.” I went home and said nothing about this episode to anyone for a long time.

But the experience changed me immediately in two ways. The first was that, after hearing that Voice while I was in the car, I couldn't even make myself doubt the resurrection. All the “contrary” arguments now seemed shallow or silly. *I had had an experience. I had heard the Lord, and I knew he was alive.* The second was that I began to want to preach. Though I was back at the university, working on my dissertation and teaching undergraduates, the pulpit became more interesting than the lecture hall. It still is.

That's my experience. Because of it, I can say that I'm a witness to the resurrection. And – believe me – there are other people around you right now — in this church today — who are “witnesses to the resurrection” in similar or even more dramatic ways. They just don't happen to be giving the sermon today. —But maybe some Sunday one of them will!

“A person with an experience is never at the mercy of somebody who just has an argument.”

We've had an encounter with Jesus Christ. Our experience of the Risen Christ defines us! —And nothing can change that.

Sure, witnesses to the resurrection have bad days, just like everybody else. I can lose my temper and get mad, or grumble, or feel depressed. I sometimes fuss about trivial things. But since that Sunday after Christmas in 1972 I have never been without hope, never doubted the future, and never feared death —because I know that my Redeemer lives.

Like many other people in the past twenty centuries, I have met the Lord. He spoke to me and changed my life. I've had an experience, and that has made all the difference.