

It is the evening of Easter Day. The disciples are gathered together in a closed room, closed for fear that the Jewish authorities will find and crucify them as they had Christ. There is not much to be positive or upbeat about. Their leader and mentor is dead, or so they think. The word has been breathlessly brought to them by Mary Magdalene of having encountered the risen Lord, but lacking any additional input other than verification by Peter and John that the body is indeed gone from the tomb, it is probable that they have concluded that either the Roman or Jewish authorities have taken the body and hidden it somewhere. Such action would be consistent with the desire of the Roman occupiers to not let Christ's body become a focal point and cause of potential civil disruption. It would also be equally important to the Jewish High Priests to prevent the Christians from taking the body away and claiming that Jesus indeed had risen from the dead. The overall atmosphere in the room is one of fear, dejection, and desolation.

Into this gathering of gloom and doom, Jesus suddenly appears. And like the sunlight that follows an enormous thunderstorm, their leader returns with gifts that brighten the outlook and reestablish direction and purpose.

- He brings comfort with his peace, love, and forgiveness.
- He brings proof of his resurrected existence. The substance of his body, his pierced hands and side, document his overcoming of death.
- He brings direction via a challenge to the disciples to renew their efforts; to continue the work he had started with them. They are to go boldly forward to build the kingdom of God.
- He brings the gift of the Holy Spirit to sustain and guide them as they move forward.
- And He brings them divine authority.

From absolute despair, He brings them to the glorious understanding of His resurrection, and all that it portends. Now they understand the things He had tried to teach them. Now they have the understanding and tools to go forward. Now they know what they have to do. And with this knowledge, fear and despair are turned into joy, courage, and confidence to take action.

It is easy to visualize in these days of excessive materialism, non-existent morals, and self focus in which we live a situation distressing similar to that faced by the first disciples. It is easy to become distracted and discouraged about what we are trying to accomplish here at St. John's. Yes, it is easy to become disoriented about life and the challenges we face. It is easy to lose purpose and passion, and to give up. But Christ did not give up. Despite almost two thousand years of recorded history of the most colossal accomplishments and horrific failures that mankind is capable of, Christ is still trying to give us those same gifts, and to have us use them as God would will us to use them on His behalf.

And my friends, we at St. John's have not given up either. Perhaps you don't realize it, but we have just concluded five years under Fr. Mark's tutelage and leadership. Palm Sunday 2012 was the first service for which he was Vicar. There were lots of unknowns and issues facing us at that point. We were leasing space in a building we had just been asked to vacate. Bible study was non-existent. Membership was declining. Stewardship was at a subsistence level, nothing better. Let's take a look at what we have accomplished since then:

- Today we own our own church, and are making steady strides at restoring it to an acceptable level of appearance and function.
- Our financial capabilities have met the challenge of buying and maintaining a church. Our operating funds are adequate and stable, our reserves are building, and we are operating at a modest surplus.
- We have provided for and staffed our first full-time clergy ministry.
- Attendance at our services is up substantially, particularly on Sundays.
- Our membership is up nicely, and shows promise of adding younger families to our overall demographics, a move we need for the long-term success of our efforts.
- We have qualified for and been granted the status of “parish” within our diocese, thus documenting the progress that has been made.

We have made some real (some might call it miraculous) progress in the last five years. It has not been easy, or without debate, but the point is we have faced our own version of the challenge to expand God's kingdom, and we have made major progress with it. We have not given up, nor given in. Everyone in this church has contributed, including some who are no longer with us, and our current situation speaks for itself. We can be excused for a momentary pause and pat on each other's back as we review our accomplishments, such as which will occur next Sunday when Bishop Grundorf joins us for the Institution of Fr. Mark as the first Rector of our Parish.

But we must remember that the job is not done. The command to expand God's kingdom still stands and provides concrete direction, despite all the heresies, distractions, and obstacles the devil can throw at it. The readings for today reinforce the fact that the gifts that Christ brought to the first disciples are still with and available to each of us! The gifts are divine; their power undiminished! I recently saw a paraphrasing of Psalm 23 that expands on this fact; let me share it with you:

- The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want – that's a gift of Relationship!
- He maketh me to lie down in green pastures – that's a gift of Rest!
- He leadeth me beside the still waters – that's a gift of Refreshment!
- He restoreth my soul for His name's sake – that's a gift of Healing!
- Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil – that's Protection!
- For Thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff comfort me – that's a gift of Faithfulness!
- Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies – that's a gift of Hope!
- Thou annointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over – that's Consecration and Abundance!
- Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life – that's Blessing!
- And I will dwell in the house of the Lord, forever – that's a gift of Security!

We have just completed a time of self-discipline and denial, followed by celebration of the victory that is ours if we live life by Christ's standards. While this immediate past is still fresh in our minds, we need to recommit ourselves to the challenge that Christ put in front of His disciples after His Resurrection. We need to make our personal witness a visible and continuing

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St. John's Anglican Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

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one to others around us as we seek to build God's Kingdom. We may be individually and as a group a religious minority in this day and age, but sacred and secular history has repeatedly indicated that it is God's righteous minority, bucking the crowd and standing up for absolute and revealed truths, that is going in the right direction. As we bask in the sunlight of our accomplishments, let us rededicate ourselves to continuing the effort. We have made a great start, but there is still much to do. As Amy Carmichael, who served in India for 55 years without furlough as a Protestant Christian missionary, once said: "We will have all eternity in which to celebrate our victories, but we have so little time left in which to win them." *Amen.*