

Sermon preached by the Rev. Thomas R. Smith, April 6, 2008, at St. Stephen's

A year and a half ago, at the U.S. Tennis Open in New York, the great player, André Agassi, ended his brilliant career with a defeat in the final match. He told the stadium crowd at the end, "The scoreboard says I lost today, but what the scoreboard doesn't say is what I've found."

The New York Times on the Sunday before the tournament filled the first page of the Sports section with a head and shoulder photo of Agassi in which one side of the head was the teenage star of the 1980's and the other half with the balded, clear-eyed mature man of today. In an interview after his final US Open game, Agassi was asked what he would say to his 17 year old self. Without any hesitation he answered, "I would tell him I understand him a heck of a lot better than I want to be him." My sense is that Agassi was talking about growing up. He's looking back and discerning where he has been..without judgment or evaluation, and lacking guilt or remorse.

For Christians, coming out of our tombs at Easter is finally understanding where we've been and who we've been, and that by God's grace we don't have to be there anymore.

It reminds me of Elizabeth Burns, whose popular best-selling book, THE LATE LIZ, was all the rage in the late 1960's. She ended her speeches time and again quoting the prayer of, so she said, a "long dead slave": "Lord, I ain't what I ought to be and I ain't what I'm going to be, but thank you Lord, that I ain't what I used to be."

The Collect, or prayer, for this 3rd Sunday of Easter, tells us important things about Jesus and the activity of God in the world. It tells us that the risen Christ was known to the disciples in the breaking of the bread....from the account we just heard in the Gospel reading today....Jesus' encounter with the two friends on the road to Emmaus.

All the stories of Jesus' appearance to people after his death are strange. It's interesting how commonplace they are, so little fanfare there is about them. In the stories of his birth, there are choirs and angels singing, mysterious kings arriving, and shepherds coming in the night, and a star. But in the stories of his resurrection, it's different. Mary waiting at an empty tomb and suddenly turning around and seeing somebody standing there, someone she thought was the gardener. Or, as we heard last Sunday, the disciples holed up in a locked room,

and Jesus coming and standing in their midst. Or Jesus appearing at the seashore where Peter and others have just returned from fishing, and he asks, “Children, have you any fish?” Or the two friends walking down a dusty road and being joined by a stranger who was Jesus but whom they didn’t recognize - perhaps because they never really recognized him while he was alive.

When they reached the village and it was getting late, they persuaded him to stop and have supper with them. And it was only then, as he took the bread, blessed and broke it, that they knew who he was. And he vanished from their sight. That’s how it always is. He comes suddenly out of nowhere, like the first clear light after a thunderstorm, and maybe we recognize him or maybe not, and our lives are never the same again because we did not recognize him or because we did.

Many years ago, a young lady from Kansas made her debut at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Overnight the name of Marian Talley was magic. The press all over the world hailed her as the great new singer of her generation. At the time, the great teacher, opera coach and singer, Madame Schumann-Heink was still living and she had heard that fresh new voice at the Met that night. When she was asked for her opinion she replied, “Miss Talley will be a great singer after she’s had her heart broken.” When the heart is broken, the song is deeper and richer than before. Part of the meaning of the Easter message in today’s world has to do with graves giving birth to new lives that are richer and deeper, more certain and fuller than when they were innocent and fresh.

Today I look back on 50 years as a priest of the Church. Where did they go? I’ll be honest with you: for the most part I’ve loved my work, though there have been times when I found it painful and overwhelming. There were times when I left parish ministry for a while; in the late 60’s to join the Peace Corps in Nepal and in the late 70’s for a long sabbatical in the mountains of New Hampshire. But the path always brought me back to parish work. I officially retired 15 years ago, but as I soon discovered, clergy don’t often get to retire, and I soon found myself doing interim work for a church in Jacksonville, Florida and later in Cambridge, Massachusetts, before finally coming home to Richmond. I started attending St. Stephen’s Church four years ago, at the end of my good friend Thom Blair’s years as rector of this church. What a painful time that was for St. Stephen’s. I’m not sure why I stayed, but I did. My sense is that this parish has learned something about unconditional love and radical welcome and hospitality. I sense that there is a new rebirth of spiritual growth and maturity, and a healthier diversity. I sense that you know yourself to be

members of a larger church community that is global in its outreach and yet has a loving and care-giving ministry to our many members.

If the Easter season tells us anything it tells us this: what we need to overcome is not our fear of death, but our panicky retreat from life. Death, after all, is predictable. But life is quite another matter. It is not death that threatens us, it is life...that raw un-tamed power that hammers at our back door and commands that we let it in.

The Bread of Christ is rising...bread that can nourish hope; bread that we can share. Easter reminds us that it's out of brokenness that new possibilities emerge, and from the darkest tomb new life awaits to be born.

A few years ago, the President of Immaculate Heart College in California was speaking to a graduating class. Her words are my words to you: "Choose life, only that and always, and at whatever risk. Christ came that we might have life and have it more abundantly. To let life leak out, to let it wear away by the passage of time, to withhold giving it and spending it is to choose nothing. The ultimate betrayal of your faith and education is to refuse to choose life with all the anguish and terror and delight and peace which are dependent upon that choice."

When he was asked what the Easter event meant, the German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who died in the Nazi prison camps of the holocaust, replied: "We must allow ourselves to be interrupted by God."

I close this sermon with a new poem by Mary Oliver. I think it says what Easter means to me more than anything I've tried to say in 50 years. Its title is "Mornings at Blackwater".

For years, every morning, I drank
from Blackwater Pond.
It was flavored with oak leaves and also, no doubt,
the feet of ducks.

And always it assuaged me
from the dry bowl of the very far past.

What I want to say is
that the past is the past,
and the present is what your life is,

and you are capable
of choosing what that will be.

So come to the pond,
or the river of your imagination,
or the harbor of your longing,

and put your lips to the world,
And live
your life.