

Easter, 2015

There will be more people in churches around the world for the celebration of Easter than on any other day of the year, more than at Christmas, the second most popular holiday, more than on Mother's Day, the third most popular holiday, and far, far more than on Father's Day, the holiday that brings out the fewest number of churchgoers.

Easter brings us out like no other feast.

I think there are a number of reasons for that.

Some people come today because it's the safest day to come.

Safest, because the results of today's churchgoing are almost guaranteed.

It's almost certain that we will be transported to a higher realm by an explosion of ritual, flowers and music.

And after church, the festivities will continue.

The celebration will spill out into this beautiful spring day in a hundred different ways.

Some people will be in church today because it's tradition.

It's one of those days when so many people are re-collected in families and primary groups, and when a part of the day's re-membering includes going to church.

Some people will be in church today because it just seems like the natural place to be.

They wouldn't be anyplace else.

Today marks the end of a forty-day Lent and it marks the beginning of the celebration for which they have waited and prepared and worked so hard.

Some people will be in church for this feast because they think they ought to be here.

They can hear a parent, literally, or someplace deep within, saying, "It's Easter. You ought to be going to church."

These are some of the different reasons why we find ourselves in church for this feast, and I'm sure there are others.

But in spite of all the different things that move us to be here, I believe there is a common motivation, too.

I believe we come today because consciously or unconsciously we're looking for something new or better.

We're looking for something that will awaken hope and joy within us, or confirm and heighten the hope and joy that are already there.

We come, I believe, because we're looking for a place where we will be known and where we can know others, a place where we will feel valued and understood, and where we can learn to value and understand others in return, a place where we will know we have been forgiven and where we might somehow find a way to forgive, a place where we will be accepted, and where we can be shown how to accept the ones we never dreamed we could accept.

We come looking for a place where we can find God, and where we can know that we have been found and claimed as God's own.

All over the world, we come to the celebration of this feast for lots of different reasons, and for all the same reasons. But no matter why we come for Easter, we all come with a common task.

We come with the task of deciding whether or not the story we hear today is our story, of deciding whether or not it's a

story we can believe, of deciding whether or not it's a story that might make any difference in our lives.

And while the task of deciding those things is common to all of us, it's also absolutely personal.

We all have to decide, but each of us has to decide for him or herself.

On what level will we embrace this story about an empty tomb and a Risen Christ, if we can embrace it at all?

We need to make a conscious and careful decision about that, and not to be too quick or casual about it.

If we're too careless or quick we might decide that it's only possible to accept the story as just that, a story.

We might say, "It's just a story. It's nice and all that, but it's just a story."

I hope we know better than that.

I hope we know that it doesn't matter if a story is true, or if it's about truth.

A story is never just a story.

Stories are wise and powerful creatures, and they can teach us so much.

Another danger in a casual, careless response is that we might claim this story as our own without ever thinking about why it's our own.

You and I aren't supposed to do that.

This is an Episcopal Church, and for better or worse, much, much better, I believe, for better or worse we don't believe things and we don't do things because someone else tells us to.

We believe what we believe and we do what we do because we are informed and guided by Holy Scripture and by the tradition of the ages and by our God-given intellect.

We read the Bible, we study history, and we use the God-given, spirit-blessed gift of reason and intellect.

We affirm that we are brought to life and called into relationship by a God who is revealed to us and known to us in intensely personal ways.

What we believe and what we do are an out-growth of that intimately personal relationship.

And when we opt out of consciously, carefully deciding for ourselves, we diminish and trivialize that sacred relationship.

We come to this feast with a common task of deciding, and while each of us is left to complete that task individually, we can talk to each other while the work goes on.

We can say to each other, “This is how God has been revealed to me,” or “This is what God is doing in my life.”

When we are able to talk about those kinds of things while the work goes on, we find that we have become the kind of community or intentional family we’ve been looking for, and by the grace of God, within that community we’re able to make the decisions of faith each of us has to make.

So how about this story about an empty tomb and a Risen Christ/

Can we claim that story as our story?

Can we believe that story?

Is it a story that might make any difference in our lives?

Well, let me tell you about how God has been revealed to me.

Let me tell you what God is doing in my life.

I claim this story as my story.

I believe this story.

I believe it is true, and I believe it is about the truth.

I believe this story has made all the difference in my life.

I believe the Risen Christ is alive and at work in the world around me.

I believe because I have seen him, and I have heard him, and I have felt his healing, loving, life-giving touch.

I met the Risen Christ in the life of a saint of St. James.

This was a woman who buried her only child at the age of eighteen, and who twenty years later received a devastating medical diagnosis of her own.

The disease was relentless in its advance, but even as the inevitable loomed larger and came closer, the grace of God that emanated from this amazing, wonderful woman was palpable.

Her wicked, hilarious sense of humor remained fully intact.

Her concern for others never wavered.

Her expressions of love and affection for her loved ones were constant.

And through this journey into the valley of the shadow of death, I learned that Christ is alive.

I have heard the Risen Christ in the giggling, banging, singing, whispering, praying children of this parish, the

children who are ready to teach us so much if we are willing to learn.

Christ is alive!

I have felt the presence and touch of the Risen Christ in the ones who have come to this community of faith, and who struggle to stay at the heart of this community in the face of all manner of difficult and heart-breaking life challenges.

Christ is alive!

I have seen and heard and felt the Risen Christ, and I know that the story is real and that it is true and that it is mine.

As you have shared your joys and your hopes and your successes, your anger and your fears and your frustrations, as you have shared your lives with me, you have become the Risen Christ, and thanks to you, I know that this story is mine.

What about you?

Have you seen or heard the Risen Christ, or felt his touch? If you haven't, please stay here in this parish church, or go and find another one that feels like the right fit, a place

where people are willing to open themselves and to share all of the best and the toughest of life.

And if you have seen or heard or felt the Risen Lord, then go and tell someone about it.

Go and tell someone who is still trying to decide.

It might make all the difference in the world.

If we know anything about peace and joy and healing and hope, the world is depending on us and waiting for us to say something.

It might make all the difference in the world.

For my part, I rejoice,

Christ is risen!