

## *The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop*

### *Easter 3, Year A, St. James by-the-Sea, April 6, 2008*

I was in the Holy Land during this last Holy Week. When we were there, by chance we met Cindy and Craig Corrie whose daughter, Rachel, was killed by a bulldozer in Gaza five years ago. She was protesting the Israeli government's destruction of a Palestinian home. We heard over and over from Palestinian Christians about forced evictions and houses being demolished. The West Bank is occupied territory, controlled by Israel, and building permits are very difficult for Palestinians to obtain. Tens of thousands of permits have gone to Israeli settlers in the last few years, but fewer than a hundred to Palestinians. The usual response is to go ahead and build anyway, without a permit when your family outgrows its quarters, or a son or daughter marries and you need another room.

The people in Gaza - Christians and Muslims - live in refugee camps, and Israel builds settlements for Jews in the West Bank, both Israelis and foreign immigrants. My image of both those realities had been of tent cities, but the reality on the ground is of cement apartment blocks, surrounded by barbed wire and other defenses. Both experiences are a long way from settled and peaceful domestic life - the kind of life that the prophets hold up as **shalom**, living in peace and justice with neighbors whom you respect because they are made in the image of God. That vision assumes that all are neighbors, and that there are no longer any strangers.

When Jesus walks up alongside those two disciples going to Emmaus, they ask him if he's the only stranger in Jerusalem who doesn't know what's going on. The word for stranger that's used there, **paroikos**, actually means a resident alien, literally someone who lives outside or alongside a normal house. The writer of First Peter uses the same word when he says, "Live in reverent fear in the time of your exile." The exiled one, the alien or stranger, is a long way from living in peace at home.

So who is the stranger? The disciples call Jesus the alien, but Peter's letter says it is we who are actually the aliens. Whoever wrote Ephesians 2:19 says that we are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. There's that vision again of a world where all God's children live together in peace. The early church uses the word **paroikia** as a description of the faith community who lives like that - as aliens in the world. It's the root of our word, "parish." Ever thought of your fellow parishioners as aliens? Maybe especially after a vestry meeting?

We are the aliens, the ones living outside God's dream, outside the heavenly city, the ones waiting outside the gate, working to build a new city where all can be citizens of the household of God. In some real sense, none of us gets to be a citizen there until we all are. We are all living in temporary quarters.

That sense of being alien is not one most of us find terribly comfortable. Lots of Americans point their fingers at others whom they call aliens, usually with the adjective, "illegal." Luke's Emmaus story is about a whole crew of illegal folk - Jesus, who is executed as a criminal outside the city gates, and his followers who don't have the legal standing to make themselves known in a culture that doesn't recognize their legitimacy. And believe me, that is a really big deal at the time Luke puts his gospel down on paper - Rome has just destroyed the Temple because of all the subversive activity going on in Jerusalem. Nobody's safe - neither the Jews who call themselves Pharisees, nor the ones who call themselves followers of Jesus' way. They are all aliens in their own land.

As global citizens we're beginning to realize that none of us lives in a permanent and unchanging home and that the way we treat our quarters - our **oikos** - has a big impact on all the other residents of this squatter's camp. Our ecology and our economy, and both have their roots in that same word for house, are dependent on how we live in this temporary house, this parish we call Earth.

Yet the further point of Jesus' encounter on the road - and there is something important there about being on a journey - comes when the three of them (and maybe others) settle down for an evening meal. When we share food, we get a taste of home. It's as simple and profound as that. Coffee hour is as important as what we do in here, for it's another reminder of the temporary quarters we share, and the reality that we know God's presence when we can lower our defenses and share the stuff of life.

What drives people to insist on the permanence of their claims to land has a lot to do with fear. Fear that there won't be enough - enough space, enough safety, enough food. Yet God comes to us whether we are ready or not - as a stranger, and an alien - in the homeliest act of breaking bread together.

In my short time here, I've seen lots of examples of how this part of the Church is working to give aliens a home - the resettled refugees from Sudan and now Burma who are being tutored after school; the homeless mentally ill who are getting help to stabilize their lives and their living arrangements; the children of immigrants who are learning social skills and nutrition along with the alphabet and numbers - skills they will need to grow up and be full members of this community. Your own ministry here at St. James is about walking with people on their spiritual journeys, according to your website. That tells me you already know, at a deep level, that none of us is really yet at home. I was intrigued to see the announcement for a talk this coming Wednesday on migration from Oaxaca to the US - another way to learn about being on the road together.

Being on the road is actually what the early Christians called their community - "the way" or "the road." They didn't come to be called Christians for quite a while. They knew themselves to be aliens, wanderers like Jesus and like him, "without a place to lay his head."

The reality of resurrection sometimes comes to us in strange guises, and as we meet strangers. Most often it has something to do with hospitality - eating together, helping another to find a more stable home, building a community that says we can serve each other even if we're still ultimately homeless.

The day after Easter, the Bishop of Jerusalem went to Jordan to meet with King Abdullah, who is Muslim. The two of them are on very good terms and there are growing Anglican congregations in Jordan. Bishop Suheil went to talk about the diocesan institutions in Jordan, particularly the schools that serve both Muslim and Christian people. On Thursday of that week, he went back to Jordan, to preside at the dedication of land that the King has given to the Anglican diocese for the purpose of building a church and a guest house. His only condition was that it had to be a gothic church. The Bishop dedicated that land on the banks of the Jordan River, at the traditional site of Jesus' baptism, and plans to build a guest house that will welcome all strangers. Those strangers can expect to meet Jesus in their midst.

The next time we meet an alien, will we recognize him in our midst?