

“The Echo of Easter”

John 20:19-31; Acts 4:32-35

The Second Sunday of Easter: May 1, 2011

**A sermon by The Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden
MUMC, Thomasville, NC**

Copyright: 2011, I. Peden

=====

A few years ago Carol and I found ourselves driving around the Dilworth area of Charlotte on the Friday following our Easter Sunday. It would be like this past Friday. We approached a certain intersection and were prevented from going any further by a police officer. To our amazement and curiosity we discovered why we had been stopped: we were as close as anyone could get to witness a Greek Orthodox Cathedral procession or parade. I guessed we were witnessing a parade of hundreds of worshippers preparing for their celebration of Easter. In fact, in 2002 when we had this experience, Greek Orthodox Christians were celebrating Easter today, a week later than the date of our traditional observance of Easter. About every three years their Easter date and ours coincide.

What we were witnessing was a procession of the bier, representing Christ’s funeral, that followed a Vesper service on their Good Friday evening. A band or choir playing or singing solemn music precedes the procession; they are followed by the cantors, the clergy, women bearing myrrh, the altar boys carrying the liturgical fans, scouts and guides, and the people of the region, who sing hymns throughout the procession. All along its route, people scatter flowers and perfume on the *epitaphios* (bier), holding lighted candles in their hands. Whatever else we may have thought of the beautiful procession, one thing is certain in my mind now: our Greek fellow Christians were really getting into Easter with much seriousness and solemnity. So in 2002 the climax of their Easter ritual would have been reached last night at midnight with a ceremony of lighting of candles that followed a service called “The Resurrection Mass.”

It made me wonder about our observance of Easter. Have we really entered into the Easter story? Or, to put it another way: Was Easter for us more than a holiday or an historical event? More than an echo from the past? How is Easter affecting the way we live our lives?

There’s a Ziggy cartoon in which Ziggy is standing at the edge of a cliff next to a sign that reads: “Echo Point.” Quite timidly, he softly says, “Echo...” Back comes the response, “Echo...” Encouraged, Ziggy raises his voice and shouts: “My name is Ziggy...” and he hears the echo, “My name is Ziggy...” Now Ziggy shouts, “What is the meaning of life?” Back

comes the response, “I’m not qualified to answer that question...”

Perhaps more than one person present will look back into her or his past and echo the words of a man in Woody Allen’s film *Hannah and Her Sisters* who says: “For all my education, accomplishments and so-called wisdom, I cannot fathom my own heart.” The Easter story offers a good place to begin such an understanding. It is all about God’s grace, active in forgiveness and renewing in mercy. Easter moves from being a historical event to a real experience in the lives of us all – when we are prepared to die and live by grace.

Some people who struggle to understand Christianity say, “It’s not *what* you believe; it just seems *too good to be true* ...that is, all your talk of God transforming the world through Christ.” This criticism is challenging, of course, because on this Second Sunday of Easter the world looks just about the same as it did last Sunday, on Easter morning, or Easter morning one year ago, or five, or ten, or two hundred years ago.

Last week we sang our Easter anthems but little or nothing seems to have changed. Our world is still broken. Violence, disease, suffering, poverty, homelessness, greed, hatred, oppression and injustice continue to plague our world. Although we may not be able to prove that the songs sung in thousands of churches on Easter Sunday and the candles lit have penetrated the dark corners where the message is so sorely needed, there is every reason for the songs to continue and the candles to shine. The light will not be extinguished; it will not be snuffed out. Far from it! We will not give in to the darkness, because God’s grace ...so wonderfully given to us in the victory of Jesus Christ ...leads us forward into new lives. And each one of us has a part to play in God’s fight against evil.

“Better to light a candle,” someone once so splendidly said: “than to curse the darkness.” And Easter, the heart of the Church’s faith and worship – indeed, the entire reason for the existence of the Church – sweeps each follower of Jesus Christ into its much-needed, thrilling, and inspiring message. Humankind’s incapacity to handle evil within and without is compelling evidence that the Gospel is needed today more than ever. Indeed, the Easter faith with its twin stories of God’s forgiveness through the Cross of Christ and the empty tomb speaks more thrillingly to our hearts than the empty assurances of those who would tell us that we no longer need a personal God.

Do you remember last Sunday? Who can forget? This church was so crowded that it

literally unseated some of the regular attendees! Ah! Today we don't have that problem...today the faithful get to reclaim their pews from the Easter crowd. The folk who think that Easter is a day-long-celebration have come and gone, and those of us who are here today know that Easter didn't end with the benediction last week. Indeed, it had only just begun. Do you remember how last Sunday we began with the traditional responsive Easter liturgy when I said "Christ is risen," and you responded, "Christ is risen indeed?" And we raised our voices as we got to the *Alleluias* at the end of the liturgy. Your response each time in the liturgy was like an echo.

On a Sunday morning long ago, in a graveyard outside of the city of Jerusalem a shout was raised the likes of which had never been heard before. Since that first Easter morning *alleluias* continue to reverberate throughout God's creation. And contrary to Ziggy's echo, as the world hears the echoing *alleluias* of Easter, we Christians believe that the meaning of life becomes clearer. In fact, we exist to proclaim Easter. That should be our passion and purpose in life. Our lives are meant to be living echoes of the first Easter.

In a sermon preached in Wellesley Congregational Church in Massachusetts, the Reverend C.F. Grant tells a story. I think it is a beautiful, poignant, inspiring story. Grace Diaz came from the Dominican Republic to America determined to make a better life for herself and her family. But, when she first arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, she had to leave her five children behind. Grace came with not much more than determination, but she had plenty of that. She worked and learned and studied, and worked some more – a lot more in fact – and in June of 2002 she opened her own daycare center which she called *Teddy Bears Under the Rainbow*. Her five children finally joined her in the United States and are all now college-educated.

As for Grace, she got her GED and completed an Associate Degree in Child Psychology and Development. Grace lived up to her name in bold and beautiful ways. She was presented with the "Rising Star Award" by the Center for Women and Enterprise on Rhode Island. In her acceptance speech she repeatedly gave thanks to God, and expressed her appreciation for all the opportunities God had given her.

Does the story about Grace not inspire you? The way she really had to make a new beginning for herself and her family – as others of us have had to do, and how grateful she was for the abundant opportunities in her life, even through the difficulties. Are those facts not inspiring? I think they are evidence of God's Spirit in her life. I was inspired by the way she

was inspired. Reading about Grace is a breath of fresh air. Let's never forget that it is immigrants who originally came to these shores and began to make America what it is today.

While the story of Grace inspires me, let me ask: "Who or what inspires you?" Surely you are inspired by those who are inspired. Right? How can we describe them? Perhaps we can describe such people as echoes of Easter. The stories of their lives retell the story of Jesus' resurrection. And I want to say this ...just this, today: *inspired and inspiring people, whose lives are being transformed ...who are echoes of Easter ...should be evident in the post-Easter Christian community.* What does that mean? It means that I'm talking about finding people like this ...people who are echoes of Easter ...in the church ...in *this* church!

Let me repeat that ...the echo of Easter should be evident in the body of Christ ...in the church. Don't think for one moment that I have made this up. It's not my idea. We read about it in today's lesson ...in Acts chapter 4. That's where one finds the picture of the community of the resurrection ...that's where there is a communal echo of Easter. And I like it. Why? Because it speaks to me of a radically different body. I don't mean a physical body ...like our bodies that are made of flesh and bones and blood. Rather, I mean a body of believers ...you know, the first Christians, or, more accurately, those converted Jews who put their trust in the risen Christ ...those courageous people in Jerusalem who listened to Peter's sermon and believed and became the nucleus of the early Christian church.

Not unlike the resurrected body of Jesus Christ, the group of believers in Acts 4 was radically different from what it had been before. The most eloquent testimony to the resurrection of Christ was a group of Christian believers whose life together was radically different and transformed from the way the world creates community. In the Spirit of Christ selfishness was being transformed into selflessness ...hoarding into sharing ...hating into loving ...rejecting into accepting ...neglecting others into caring for others ...so that, get this ...Acts 4:34 states: "There was not a needy person among them!" Wow! Would that we could say that! Maybe it will happen sooner than we think.

"Christ is risen!" I say. "Christ is risen, indeed!" you respond. This is more than liturgy; it is an Easter acclamation that is heard in the echo of our lives. Let us continue being echoes of Easter in the way we live and share and care ...in the way we demonstrate Christ's resurrection.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.