

The Sixth Sunday in Easter – Year C
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- SERMON -

In our Gathering Prayer this morning we prayed: We gather in the name of our Easter God: Our Risen Lord transforms darkness into light, hatred into tolerance, despair into hope.

Much of the time, our lives are a compromise between happiness and sorrow, joy and discouragement. This ‘roller coaster’ kind of existence is a challenge to our faith, and a denial of “the peace of God which surpasses our understanding”, and God knows this.

The whole of Easter has been about equipping us with powerful faith-tools to defeat the forces that would drag us down. There are post-Resurrection stories of a group of defeated fishermen who end up going back to their lives of fishing, only to discover the risen Jesus meeting them for breakfast. There are the travelers walking to Emmaus encountering a stranger who turns out to be Jesus, who breaks bread with them. They discover their hearts gladdened.

These are experiences opened to us, too.

So, where do these good things come from? You can’t place an Amazon order for them, no, but you can hear them, experience them, and find them in the faith community. The early Christians learned they could face persecution, possible arrest, trial, and even execution because of the power of the resurrection they found in the Easter community. They also learned that what happened to them was of little account, because they placed themselves under the gracious God who delivered them from the cloud of darkness in their lives.

Today, we hear about Lydia, a woman of obvious wealth (understanding purple cloth she made was used for high officials and nobility). And we hear and how she embraces Paul’s teaching and invites he and his friends to come and stay in her house. She knows something is missing in her otherwise successful life, and when she hears about Jesus, she discovers an abundant God who fills the empty place in her heart, and she invites God in.

We watch Jesus go to a pool named Bethsaida. The name of this place, Bethsaida, means “House of Mercy”.

While there, Jesus sees a man who had been paralyzed for 38 years. There’s no way this man would ever walk again. Everybody knew that. If you weren’t quick enough, strong enough, fast enough – you weren’t going to get healed at this pool believed to provide healing. The weak were left with little hope.

But then Jesus came to Bethsaida. The Lord of Mercy came to the House of Mercy. And He chose a man who had no chance of ever being healed... and He healed him.

The Spirit will teach us how God desires and gives us the good things we need, even when we don't know what they are or how to ask for them.

I heard recently of a man named Mark who started attending a church because his business was failing. He couldn't separate the business failure from his feeling that he was a failure as well. In a short while, people who had been strangers began to talk to him, sit and drink coffee with him, and one older woman who owned a small business offered to help him develop a business plan. In less than a year, his business began to show a profit. In a practical way, he was taught how God loved him and desired good things for him and gave him the guidance and wisdom he needed.

The Spirit will also remind us, especially when things are not going well, what really matters and to whom we belong. The faith community is the place where we are restored, not in just a feel-good way, but in the depths of our hearts. The sign of the cross, the breaking of the bread at communion, the hymns (read the words even if you don't sing), and the Scriptures are all reminders of how much we are loved and cherished and redeemed. I've heard it said, "Human beings solve problems; God redeems messes." All of us think we can fix things, but often messes overwhelm us. We are reminded, as the disciples were after the death of Jesus, that God redeems messes – and that includes each of us.

Good things seem to have been turned into a commodity. They are scarce, and you have to be able to pay for them. At least that is what we are told by ads and even stories in the news. Go to this doctor or this lawyer, get treated at this cancer center, buy this or that appliance for comfort in your home – the list is endless – and expensive.

God has another way that is based on abundance. God gives us what we need, always providing for us those things which cannot be bought or bargained for. They are things that endure, such as hope, faith, love, fellowship, and friends. They are qualities like peace and wisdom and courage. God gives us these gifts through the Spirit, and God also gives the ability to find them in others. The world is full of them, though often they are masked by our focus on the news of anger and darkness.

So, here are some ways you can, like Lydia, be faithful to the Lord and receive the abundance of good things God has for you:

Expect them. The Beloved, the one who created you, the one at whose birth the angels sang, loves you. So, begin to expect good things. They are not earned as much as they are bestowed. And perhaps you have neglected to see them right there in front of you in the person you love, the people you work with, and the beauty that surrounds you daily. The more you find yourself saying, "God will bless this in the intended way," the more you will see it happen. And you might end your prayers with, "Thank you, Lord, for what you are about to do."

When you are discouraged or feeling alone, remember that this is in part a gift from God as well. Sometimes we are given experiences that remind us of how dependent we are on the risen Lord. Read our Gathering Prayer in our bulletins from this Easter season daily for one week, honoring and remembering our Easter God, and you will begin to see your attitude about the world and His creation change to a more positive and peaceful frame of mind.

This week, the Episcopal Church honors Rogation Days, the days of planting and hallowing of creation. So, plant something – a tree or a plant or even a seed, and nurture it. This will reconnect you with the earth and the blessings of creation, and it will remind you that we are all dependent on the rain and the soil and the sun given by the Creator for us all.

Determine – you are going to reduce your contribution to the world's waste problem and ask God to guide you in your actions so that it becomes a partnership with God and others.

Lastly, expect more serenity in your life. Serenity is a quality often denied us, but much of the time we deny it to ourselves. God wants our lives to be lived in serenity, but we have to claim it as a gift. Recite the serenity prayer: God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

The “good things [that] surpass our understanding” are waiting to be claimed and celebrated by all of us. Awaken to their presence, claim them as your spiritual inheritance, and live them in witness to the risen Lord.