

Easter Day

March 27, 2016

Rev. Ken Wratten at St. Stephen's, San Jose

Acts 10:34-43

Peter testifies that faith in Jesus is available to everyone.

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Luke 24:1-12

At our last preschool chapel before Easter recess, it was that time in the church year to explain why I wear a cross necklace, and why the school processional cross has a cross shape at the top, and why there is a cross above our altar, and on our walls, and carved into the front of our altar. I explained that religious leaders became more and more angry with Jesus, and more and more jealous about him being a threat to their power. They decided to get rid of him; so they had him arrested, and put on a cross; and he died on the cross. I said that everyone who loved Jesus was very sad, but they forgot something important. Jesus had told them that this would happen, but he would see them again soon. And that is exactly what happened. God brought Jesus back to life! I explained that we use crosses to remind us of Jesus; the life he lived, how he died, and that God gave him life again.

The symbol of the cross is very important to us. In the Episcopal Church, almost all crosses are empty. Some other Christian churches carry the body of Jesus on the cross. Our church deliberately focuses on Jesus' defeat of the cross, and not primarily his death on the cross. The focus is on grace, above redemption.

The message of Easter has everything to do with the power of the cross.

Before Jesus' time, there were occasional executions by crucifixion. But Rome made a science of it, and they did a volume business in that particular form of execution. Some estimates are that Rome executed tens of thousands of people by crucifixion. In a Newsweek magazine article from 2015, crucifixion is described as a political weapon. It was meant to send an unmistakable message to anyone daring to stand up against Roman rule: "Do not stir dissent or this will be the result." The cross was meant to strip the victim of all dignity, to intimidate, to fill their conquered subjects with fear, and to prevent any thought of subversion.

But Jesus was never intimidated, by anyone. He was not intimidated by warnings of what would happen if he went to Jerusalem. He was not intimidated by the betrayal by Judas. He was not intimidated after three years of living with his disciples, that Peter would actually deny having ever known Jesus. He was not intimidated by Pilate or Herod, who had the power to release him. He was not intimidated when he hung on a cross, but instead asked God to forgive the soldiers who had nailed him to the cross.

Because of Easter morning; because of Jesus' victory over death, he changed the impulse response that following generations would have to the cross. Did you see the musical on channel two last week, "The Passion", filmed in New Orleans? A huge group carried a twenty foot long illuminated cross through the streets of New Orleans, as Jesus' last three days were acted out. Tyler Perry said, "Can you imagine that tonight there is a 20 foot cross going down Bourbon Street?"

People along the route were asked what the cross meant to them. Some who lived through hurricane Katrina said that the cross means 'hope' to them. One family said that the cross means 'love' to them. Others spoke about trust in God, endurance, perseverance, being thankful, forgiven, blessed, accepted by God. What feelings does the cross instill in you?

Scriptures describe the power that is in the cross of Jesus; 1 Cor 1:18, ¹⁸"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." The cross is the symbol of the power of God.

[Matthew 16:24-26 (NIV)] ²⁴ (Then) Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Because of Easter, the cross is not a symbol of intimidation, or fear. The cross no longer carries the body of Christ because he defeated his cross, and now he is with us in Spirit (capital S), to give us hope, trust, acceptance, and all the values I mentioned earlier. Jesus overcame his cross, so that we can ask for his help to overcome our own crosses.

We all have our own crosses to bear; feeling the hurt of losing people we love, having disagreements that seem impossible to resolve, not knowing how to pay the bills, being exhausted trying to keep responsibilities met, losing the will to be kind: What crosses are you bearing now?

Jesus said, [Matthew 11:28-30 (NIV)] ²⁸ “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

You and I see the symbol of a cross everywhere; my lapel pin at hospital visits-changed conversation; in preschool classroom-CHRISTIAN preschool; on a necklace, a book cover, or a bracelet, or designer shirt, or hat, or key chain, or displayed on a hillside (like our hillside), or on the roof of a church. Some people may think that this is just a standard piece of jewelry. It is NOT. Even if the person wearing it does not realize what it stands for, its presence sends a message to the world, that there was a man named Jesus who died on a cross like that one. This man was the Son of God, raised from the dead, from death on a cross, and by living again, proved that he was who he said he was, he accomplished what he said he would accomplish, and his motivation for coming to live among us, and for the death he suffered, were his radical love for God and for us.

The power of the cross is not the power once claimed by Rome. The power of the cross is the power of God, who took Jesus from the cross, leaving it empty, and giving that form the power to anchor and reinforce our faith when we need it most.

Display your cross with pride – pride in what Jesus has done for us; and what he is doing for us now.

I thank God on this Easter Day for the power of the cross of Christ. Alleluia, Christ is risen! (The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.