

God in Action

April 22, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

While the pace of our daily living may make it hard to realize the fact, we *are* still in the Easter Season. And in these two weeks since Easter Day, there are many images which have been brought to mind of the monumental event of Easter. The first light of dawn, the women going dutifully to the tomb, their astonishment at the stone having been rolled away, the angels, God's messengers, standing by, assuring them that he had risen as promised; the women running excitedly to tell the disciples; Peter and John racing to the tomb to see for themselves; the linen clothes lying in the tomb; his appearance to Mary Magdeline; the excitement which filled those who loved him; the confrontation with Thomas, dear doubting Thomas (we can be so like him); and, to me, the most beautiful of all the Easter happenings: two men, at dusk on the Resurrection Day, walking the road to Emmaus, and in the twilight, a stranger falling in beside them and talking with them as they walked, their sitting together

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for the evening meal, and, finally, in the breaking of the bread they knew him.

The first lesson this morning describes another scene, quite some time later on, another man, another road and another purpose. The man was Saul of Tarsus and the road was leading to Damascus, the purpose, to destroy the Church of Jesus Christ. As he walked intent on his purpose with hate in his heart for those misguided ones who followed the dead carpenter, there was a blinding flash of light from heaven, the voice saying to him, *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting* (Acts 9:4-5), and then silence, blindness, revelation and *conversion*.

And out of Saul's fantastic experience came Paul the Apostle, and in his conversion we find many things were revealed to Paul, immediately and directly. They were flashes of discovery. They were glories of

God in Action

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certainty. They were facts which gripped Paul's mind and soul. Foremost among these was a fact which Paul shared with the women, with the eleven, with those on the road to Emmaus and it was simply the fact that *Jesus was alive!* Paul saw no vague heavenly being, no impersonal Messiah. It was Jesus himself, the person of whom he had heard so much, whose life and work had become so well known to him through his persecuting contacts with this new sect. The vision of a heavenly Messiah would never, by itself, have made Paul a Christian. In fact, it might only have served to strengthen his Jewish pride and to confirm him in his antagonism to those who dared to claim divine rights for a crucified Nazarene. It was Christ himself and none other whom Paul saw. The faith on which they had staked their lives was really true. Stephen's dying declaration (Acts 7:55-60) that he saw Jesus at the right hand of God had been, not blasphemy, but sober, literal fact! All that those persecuted men and women had said about having their leader with them still,

God in Action

April 22, 2007

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about holding daily communion with him had been no fabricated and preposterous story, as it had seemed, but strictly accurate and genuine. And for Paul this was a *staggering discovery*.

It meant, moreover, that everything that Jesus had been and had done, every title that he had claimed, or, that his followers had claimed for him, was now attested by God Himself. The conquest of Jesus over death and defeat could be nothing less than God in action, God's right arm made bare, God's seal set convincingly to the Messianic claim, God's *final* vindication of his Son. The Resurrection was God's act.

In First Corinthians, Paul wrote, "We have testified of God that he raised up Christ (I Cor. 15:15a). Elsewhere, he states, "Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father" (Rom. 6:4) and "You are risen with him through the faith of the operation of

God in Action

April 22, 2007

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God who has raised him from the dead (Col. 2:12). These and other passages by Paul point back to the startling truth which broke upon Paul in the hour of his conversion, that this new religion stood, not upon any human credulity or invention, but on the very word and guarantee of God. As Paul himself put it, in Jesus risen and alive there had sounded forth the great divine **YES**, affirming all the most glorious promises that God had ever given.

We must recognize with Paul that, without the Resurrection, the death would have been powerless to save; that without the risen, living, present Christ, with whom, through faith, the believer can come into union, complete union, all the benefits of the death would have had to stand unappropriated forever. It was the Resurrection fact upon which the Church was built. It was the Resurrection Gospel which the Apostles preached. It was the real experience of **union** with the Risen Christ that made them the mighty men

God in Action

April 22, 2007

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of God they were. When we look at Calvary, as we did on Good Friday, we must not fail to see the Resurrection light breaking behind it.

So, here we are in Eastertide 2007. The Resurrection is nothing less for the Christian today, nothing less for us than it was for Paul on the road to Damascus. Our world is no less chaotic for us than Paul's was for him. The great question was just as haunting in the first century as it is in the first decade of the 21st Century. Yet, the answer is the same. In the person of Jesus Christ lies the key to God's plan for us and our world. It's no big secret; it's no great imponderable. There will always be those who ignore Christ, but, to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, the answer is there. The very universe contains something which is on the side of the Gospel. The ultimate values of life converge upon Jesus Christ. It is from Christ that every principle of goodness and every deed of beauty and every word of truth have sprung. It is in Christ

God in Action

April 22, 2007

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that such things are sustained and have their real existence. Our world *may* seem like a riddle, it *may* seem like chaos, but Paul saw it otherwise:

What confidence! What hope! To despair of the world, if we believe Paul, is simply to despair of Christ. If the redeeming death and resurrection reveal a divine love, they also reveal a determination that nothing in earth and hell shall break and a Christ who *will* triumph in this world. The faith which has been born of a personal experience on some Damascus road of the Spirit cannot stop short of this belief. ***He is risen! He does live!*** In any sound Christianity, the Resurrection of Christ is not so much an article of the Creed as it is the very life of the faith. We can meet him, right here, this morning, right now, if we want to, and, like those on the road to Emmaus, in the breaking of the bread, we shall know him.

AMEN.