

What greater message of hope could there possibly be?

*Sermon preached by The Rt. Rev. Mark S. Sisk, Bishop of New York
at the eleven o'clock service,
April 26, 2009: The Third Sunday of Easter.
Based on Luke 24:36b-48.*

Good morning. It is nice to be back at St. Bartholomew's. I am happy that my wife, Karen, seated back there—about two thirds of the way back, as well as Canon Dietsche, join me for this visitation today as, happily, they customarily do. Not only do I take great personal joy in being able to Confirm and Receive these good folks into the Episcopal Church, I have been looking forward to this opportunity to worship with you, the good people of St. Bart's.

As I said at the 9:00 service, I am a great fan of your Rector and the wonderful team with whom he works. Your focus, your imagination, your leadership, and the scope of your vision are an inspiration to this whole diocese. To say nothing of the importance of your sacrificial support of the assessment budget upon which so very much depends. Thank you! Thank you, very much. Well done!

Virtually every time I make a visitation, I begin my sermon by pointing to the three elements that I believe are essential for healthy parish life: worship—which you offer weekly, if not daily; nurture—in which we sustain our own members; and mission—in which we reach out to the community, in so many different ways. But in addition to these three basic elements, I want to add a fourth key message that flows from these foundational three. And that is the message of hope.

We find ourselves living in a very turbulent time. People are confused and frightened. The economic fabric of our nation, and indeed our world, has disintegrated with a force and rapidity that only those old enough to remember the Great Depression can recall. Our communities, our world, desperately need some sign of hope. It is, I am convinced, a part of our calling as Christian people to be that sign of hope. Hope, not in the sense that we smugly claim that we have all the answers. Nor is our hope to be found in the glib assertion that this economic collapse doesn't really matter. Of course it does! But what we can assure others, and be reminded of ourselves, is that those things that matter most in life—the deep things that give life meaning—are not things that can be controlled by,

measured by, or destroyed by the ups and downs of our economic fortunes.

As I heard a commentator say the other evening on the television, "No acquisition has ever been transformative." As a matter of fact, it is precisely a crisis such as the one that we are in now that reminds us of that fact of those foundations. These times remind us that it is the loves, the relationships, and the values that we hold dear that help us catch a glimpse of the ultimate purpose of our existence. That is what is transformative.

It is our calling as Christians to remember ourselves and to reassure others that we live embraced in the arms of the one who is ultimately and finally triumphant. It is in the light of this larger mission and ministry that I bring you greetings from the nearly two hundred congregations of the Diocese of New York.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the central and defining claim of Christianity. That basic claim has been challenged from the very beginning. Those challenges have been of two sorts: one doubted that it really was Jesus himself who died on the cross—that's what the Gnostics of the early church believed; they tell stories of Jesus himself looking down from a hillside and saying, "Isn't it amazing they think that is me on the cross." In later centuries, Muslims came to believe as well that it was not Jesus who died on the cross; he only appeared to. Jesus, in both these points of view, was great and wonderful—so great and so wonderful was he that God could not possibly have allowed him to actually die the grizzly death of crucifixion. The other, and opposite view was that, while Jesus had actually died on the cross, the resurrected figure was not Jesus himself but rather it was his ghost.

Our story in today's gospel reading from St. Luke addresses this second objection. Remember that after Jesus said to them, "Peace be with you," even though that was apparently a familiar greeting, nonetheless, they were startled and terrified, the scriptures say. And they thought that they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus then said to them, "Why are you frightened and why do you have doubts

in your hearts. Look at my hands and my feet, see it is I, myself. Touch me and see for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” And then, to make that point even more firmly, he went on to ask for something to eat. The point of all this was that the figure that stood before them was not an apparition; it was not a ghost with all the unpredictability of ghosts. But rather Jesus was saying, “It is I, the truly resurrected Jesus.”

Coming to understand the importance of the resurrection was absolutely crucial to understanding what was this good news—the gospel. Now clearly it took those first disciples some time to figure it out. But they weren’t unique in their struggle. We still wrestle to understand what Jesus’ resurrection means for us and for our world. A first answer, a true answer—but an answer that is ultimately, I think, inadequate—is that in Jesus we discover the promise of life beyond death. Now, don’t mistake me: that’s good news. But it’s worth remembering that in and by itself that bit of news would not have been considered earth-shaking news in the first century. There were then, as there are now, many religions as well as some philosophies which promise life after death. So, as good news as that is, it was certainly not unique to Christianity. There’s more to Jesus’ gospel than the promise of life after death, though it surely includes that promise.

In his life, in his death, and in his resurrection, Jesus teaches us not only how to die but how to live. Jesus frees us from the law and in its place gives us principles by which to live—principles that we are to apply in every particularity of our existence. And finally, his resurrection gives us the assurance that no matter what might happen, God will be with us every moment of our lives. All this is what Jesus meant when he commissioned the disciples saying, “Thus it is written that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day. And that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. Thus it is written,” he said.

In other words, Jesus is saying that God had intended from the very beginning of creation to become incarnate in Jesus and to walk this earth among us. Jesus’ birth was

not God’s last-ditch attempt to rescue creation from the mess that it had gotten into. Rather, Jesus’ birth represented the fullness of time when the full scope of the divine will could at last be revealed. And therefore the core of Jesus’ message—the essence which made it good, which made it stunning, which made it revolutionary—is the good news that at the very heart of God is abiding love that will never, ever, ever desert us. No matter what we do. No matter what we have done. We simply cannot separate ourselves from God’s love. No, we can deny it, we can reject it—we are certainly not worthy of it—but the good news that we discover in Jesus is that from God’s perspective, we are never beyond or outside of the divine embrace.

Then, as now, there was a conviction that if bad things happened—if injustice occurred, if evil seemed to triumph—that must signal that either God was mad or God was absent. The message of Jesus’ death and resurrection is that that is not so. Jesus’ message is that, come what may, God is with us. God is always walking with us in good times and in bad. Indeed God is with us not only when we are right, but also when we are wrong. We are never abandoned. We are never beyond the reach of God’s love—just as we are never beyond the reach of God’s justice: a justice that will vindicate us to the extent that we need vindication and a justice that will forgive us and restore us to wholeness when we need that restoration.

The message of Jesus’ restoration is that we are worthy of God’s love because God has chosen to make us worthy. That’s such a simple thing to say, isn’t it? We’re worthy of love. But when it’s true, its implications are simply enormous. What greater message of hope could there possibly be? We, we who are never alone, are worthy of love. To live in the light of that knowledge is truly to live in the light of the good news. To live in the light of that knowledge is to live with the spirit of charity and generosity and forgiveness towards others, since we know ourselves to have received such a gracious embrace. Let us rejoice in that knowledge. Let us rejoice in the assurance of that hope today, tomorrow and unto the ages of ages. *Amen.*

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