

Four weeks ago today, we celebrated The Resurrection of Our Lord which we commonly call Easter. So we are in the afterglow of that Queen of Feasts, the most important day of the year for Christians. We will continue in the Easter Season for two more Sundays, seven all together. The victory of our God remains the focal point of our worship always but with greater emphasis in this Eastertide.

The texts for today announce the triumph of the Lamb of God. In the first lesson from Acts, we hear the words of Stephen just before he was stoned to death, and Stephen cries out, "Look, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:56), a statement that we repeat in the Christian Creeds every week. In the second lesson, Peter writes, "Come to him, a living stone, through rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight..." (1 Peter 2:4). Christ is not an inert rock, but a living stone. The note of eternal celebration echoes in the words of Jesus, "If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him (John 14:7). Christ Jesus lives and rules eternally, Alleluia! He is Immanuel, God with us forever and ever. Alleluia!

Prove it!

That's what the mind of the enlightenment has put into our minds. Where is the proof? How can we know that this declaration is true? Show me!

And unfortunately, many Christians stumble around with comments about the empty tomb, which actually prove nothing to a skeptical mind – only that the tomb was empty, not that anyone was alive. Others point to all the people who have reported near death experiences and then concluding that such experiences are proof of life after death just as Jesus said.

This perspective has become so much more prevalent in our language and thinking since the publication in 1975 of the book, Life after Life. The book and others report that people with such experiences have a feeling of floating out of their own bodies, being in a state of calm and serenity, feeling as if they are moving upward through a bright tunnel of light, and then reaching a border or boundary as if continuing past that point would be a point of no return. All of this is then used as evidence by some as proof of eternal life.

But that's not the witness of the Bible. Other peoples' near death experiences cannot be used as proof of life after death. The only evidence we have is that of the resurrection of Jesus, and that we take on faith, not proof. The way we speak of our religious commitment is to say the Christian faith, not the Christian proof. We trust in a risen Savior, not in a list of precepts and principles. Our faith rests in him who said, in today's Gospel reading, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Now, of course, even the Bible tells us that the last witness of the person of Christ Jesus was at his Ascension which we will celebrate in two weeks. So, where have you seen him? Why do you believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, born of the Virgin Mary and suffered under Pontius Pilate?

Why? No proof, no physical evidence today. Why believe? Because he is alive, we do have experience of him today. We come together to affirm our experiences and the experiences of each other and find them to be consistent with the Biblical witness. Christian faith is not just a book, not just commandments and axioms for living, it is a living relationship with a living Lord who calls people to be witnesses, communicators, messengers, and representatives. In worship, we hear his Holy Word which gives us comfort, strength, confidence, reconciliation, and guidance. We see him acting in our lives through water, bread, and wine – vehicles of his grace and conduits of his cleansing. We have the privilege of experiencing his presence in caring conversations of the faithful fellowship.

Kay and I received many communications of love, care, and consolation since the death of our daughter, Carlene. Through them, God works, touching our aching hearts and filling the darkness created by her death. Each contact has lightened our load just a bit, and the combined effect is that we are standing upright, here today with you, receiving again God's shower of compassion and love through you, the communion of saints, the assembly of the faithful. God's people from coast to coast and beyond have reached out to us and given us comfort. It's not that our grief is gone, but you and others have been the deliverers of the compassion of our Lord in the midst of grief. We have seen Christ Jesus through your care and the care of many others. We thank the Lord.

The Lord Jesus has shown himself to us, and you and others are the means by which we do see Christ Jesus.

In the second lesson today, the writer of 1 Peter declares, "Now you are a chosen race..." (1 Peter 2:8). Chosen. Who did the choosing? The Lord God chose us to be part of his royal priesthood and holy nation. Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me, I chose you..." (John 15:16). Yes, you and I are a chosen race – not with any ethnic identity attached, but with a common trust in our chosen-ness. We love to take credit for deciding to attend church this morning, or even for deciding for Christ. It is quite easy to think that we are the ones who initiated the relationship with the Lord Jesus. We can think that way only if we ignore his words, "You did not choose me, I chose you."

Our role is to respond to the Lord Jesus. When he invites, we say, "Yes" or "No" to him daily. Our response is not a once-for-all-time single response. He invites; we follow.

The Lord Jesus created the Church, so that the Church could be the messenger of forgiveness, life, and salvation in Christ. Church is a royal priesthood. What is a priest? A priest is an intermediary – one who speaks to God on behalf of the people and who also speaks to the people on behalf of God. In our baptisms, we were inducted into the royal priesthood of believers, and it is our task always to be his priests in this world, intermediaries between heaven and earth, between humanity and the Almighty. What a job we have.

When you communicated to Kay and myself in our grief, you were not just speaking for yourself but you were God's word and voice to us. Your words of concern were the

Lord's shower of compassion. Your touches and hugs were not just expressions of human care but of the tender mercy of our Lord. You were priest to us, intermediaries of Christ's grace and love. We thank you for helping us see Jesus in moments when life looked very hazy and unclear – and still does, but less so.

Whoever has seen me has seen the Father, said Jesus. You and others gave us a clear glimpse in dire days.

Our challenge is to show that same love to others – especially to people who aggravate us, offend us, demean us, criticize us, and threaten us. Who might that be in your life? Sometimes it is hard to remember that I am part of a royal priesthood, representative of the risen Christ and a messenger of his grace for all and to all.

Some time ago I received this email.

You may have heard in the news that the Post Office has been forced to take down small posters that say, "In God We Trust." (I want you to know I phoned the United States Postal Service and learned that there is no such action.) The law, they say, is being violated. Anyway, I heard proposed on a radio station show, that we should all write "In God We Trust" on the back of all our mail. After All, that is our national motto, and its' on all the money we use to buy those stamps. I think it is a wonderful idea. We must take back our nation from all the people who think that anything that offends them should be removed. If you like this idea, please pass it on. It has been reported that 86% of Americans believe in God. Therefore, I have a very hard time understanding why there is such a mess about having "In God We Trust" on our money and having God in the pledge of Allegiance. Could it be that we just need to take action and tell the 14% to sit down and shut up?

First of all, remember there is no order or law to take down such posters. Second, the word God is quite loosely used and can apply to all kinds of religious understandings that do not include the Christian perspective that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself. In other words, no incarnation, no Christ Jesus. Third, what kind of message would we give if we told non-Christians, "Just sit down and shut up?" I for one believe that such a witness would be very negative, harmful, hostile, and ineffective.

I much prefer the kind of witness that you and others gave Kay and myself by your love, concern, compassion, and prayers.