

Third Sunday of Easter – April 22, 2007
St. Andrew’s Episcopal Church, Mullens, WV
All Things Are Made New

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We are in a period of time in the church calendar when the lectionary can get a little strange. Instead of the standard Old Testament, New Testament, Gospel sequence, we get three readings from the New Testament. This will be true for the next several Sundays, as we are in the time known as “the great fifty days” which ends with Pentecost. The compilers of the lectionary have a formidable task, which is to say they have a lot of story to tell and a relatively short period of time in which to do so.

Pentecost – or Shavuot – is one of two great festivals observed by the Jewish people in the spring. It is the festival of the wheat harvest and it recalls a key event in Israel's history - when God gave Moses the Law on Mount Sinai and initiated a covenant with the people of Israel.

Shavuot takes place fifty days after Pesach or Passover, and marks the culmination of the Jewish Feast of Weeks.¹

We will celebrate Pentecost, which we used to call Whitsunday, on the last Sunday in May, a day which is called by some “the birthday of the Church,” for it is on this day that Jesus bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit on his apostles. So we have six Sundays in which to recount those earliest days in the history of what we now know as the Church.

And as always, we will try to discern what the Bible is saying to us today, to determine what God would have us do in his service in this time and in this place. In some sense, that is the mission of all Christians at all times and in all places. It certainly makes sense for us in the Episcopal Diocese of West Virginia.

¹ <http://resources.bibles.com/pages/aboutpentecost>

My own assignment by Bishop Klusmeyer to serving principally Ascension Church in Hinton and occasionally Saint Andrew's Church in Mullens is an example of church building. I don't mean for a moment to say that I will be building a church all by myself, for that is very far from true. But it is correct to say that we – you, and I, and others not present here today – are engaged in the process of developing ministry teams that will serve these congregations and the communities in which they are located. We are engaged in doing the work of the Church.

So, what might we learn from today's lessons? I think the clear message is that Jesus Christ would have us open to doing things in a new way, a way that will be revealed to us.

Let's consider first Saul's encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Damascus. A justifiably famous story which explicitly demonstrates that Jesus expects us to change our ways and to do his work, which is a new work, not the same old ways we have been used to. Saul is zealous in his defense of classic Judaism – the old ways – he approves of and is present for the stoning death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. And then his life is changed for ever.

I hear two note-worthy statements in the road to Damascus story:

- One is that when God wants us to do something, he will let us know. It may not be so dramatic as Saint Paul's experience, but it will be there. It is up to us to be open to the possibility that God has something in mind for us, something more than we are doing or something completely different.
- Secondly, I hear that sometimes we are called upon to be Ananias, which is to say we are called to carry God's message to others.

To put that in the context of the churches in Hinton and Mullens – and in truth in many other Episcopal churches in this diocese – some of us may be called by God to do something other than what we are now doing. I'm not here to deliver that message to any of you – at least not this morning! – but I am here to say that we must be open to what God intends for us to do.

Just as the reading from the Acts of the Apostles recounts God's revelation to Paul, so the Epistle speaks of another revelation, this one to John. We're not sure which John – some say the apostle, the son of Zebedee – other scholars say the writing styles are entirely different and so it cannot be the same person – it really doesn't matter. The apocalyptic vision that John of Patmos describes shows us the lamb, the symbol of the risen Lord.

And the message of Revelation is simple – we are to worship God and God alone. I don't mean to say that this last book of the Bible is simple to understand, for it isn't. In fact, it is a book I do not recommend reading without access to a good commentary – or two or three! There are historical reasons for the writing in Revelation, which tells the churches of the Roman province of Asia to resist the demands of the Roman state that the emperor be worshipped as a God, and to resist even if it means death.

So the Acts reading and the Revelation reading are really very similar in their messages to us today: we need to be open to the redeeming work of God in our lives, and then to hold fast to our convictions. God will provide us the strength we need to be his disciples.

And so we arrive at the Gospel reading, which in this context is notable to me for three things:

- First, the apostles, even though they have all seen the risen Lord – and in John's Gospel have already received the gift of the Holy Spirit – yet they do not know what they should be doing about it. I find that a comforting situation, for I realize there are times when I don't know what to do in my life, and I suspect you may feel the same way about yours. We are in good company.
- The second thing I like about this passage is that Simon Peter – the “rock” on which Jesus will build his Church – Peter, even when he is not sure what to do, decides to do something. This is so typical of Peter – he who would build tents for Jesus and the prophets at the Transfiguration – he who says he will never deny Jesus and then does so three times in one night. Peter is probably not the greatest intellect of his day, but he's a man of action. In this case, I see him deciding that “enough is enough” – this business of staying locked up for fear of their lives has to stop. Peter – with no idea of what to do next – decides he's going fishing. And the others troop right along with him. The band of eleven repeat what had happened when they were first called – some of them are fishermen who have caught nothing, and yet put down their nets again when told to do so, and catch more fish than they know what to do with.
- And the third thing in this passage is for me the most important. It is that after the apostles, those men closest to Jesus and chosen by him to build his Church, after

the apostles demonstrate that they still don't quite "get" it – these despondent men look to the shore and there they see the Lord, who has patiently come to them yet once again to feed them, to show them what they are to do.

I believe that we are called to respond to the reality of Easter, that all things are made new again, including each of us. I believe that God has something in mind for each of us, not in the sense of manipulating us, but in the sense of having us use our skills and gifts to carry out the work we have been given by him to do in the world. And I believe that God is incredibly patient, and continues to give us the strength and support we need to have in order to follow him.

I spoke early on in this sermon about building ministry teams. We need to find new ways to do God's work in this diocese. I do not say that to disparage what anyone has done or is doing. The Church always needs to be finding new ways to respond to the changing world around us. Have faith, my friends, that God will support us in the work he has given us to do.