

Sunday, March 27, 2016
All Saints Episcopal Church
San Leandro, California
The Rev. Justin R. Cannon
2016 Easter Sermon

As a kid I was not a big fan of church. God felt distant. Jesus sounded like a nice guy, but I didn't understand what he had to do with me. The prayers felt empty—we said the same thing every Sunday, over and over again, or at least that's how it felt to me as a kid. I grew up in inner city Detroit and just after finishing fifth grade, my family moved north two hours to Lexington, Michigan, where I began middle school.

Middle school can be rough. I don't know anyone who really is just gung ho about their middle school years—like, “Wow, those were the best years of my life.” They're awkward years—physically as our bodies are changing, socially as attractions and crushes emerge—and we all know middle school kids have a wonderfully-tuned radar for honing in on things that are different. I had no chance. I was the new kid and most of these kids had been through grade school together. I was tall and gangly. I was the smart kid who always had the right answer—not a popular attribute at that age. I had braces—and cleaned them in the bathroom mirror after lunch. And believe it or not kids at that age have a great radar for detecting the closeted gay kids—even though at that age most of us were probably clueless about sexual orientation. And to top it all off, I had a head of bright red hair.

I hated the bus ride home from school—the location where these kids could tease and torment me without parental or teacher supervision. I remember the names and faces of my tormenters. These were some of the darkest years of my life. And mind you, like I said, God was very distant, so there was no comfort or consolation to be found in church. These years persisted and the summer after eighth grade, my family did something a little different. We had “house church” and met with two Catholic families we knew in one of our homes. We had bread, wine, prayers, and songs. There was one song sung at one of these services that I'd like to teach you—just the refrain, which repeats over and over in a meditative manner. The words are: “There's an almost unbelievable goodness that helps us face the fierce unknown.” We sang this while a cantor sang a descant of Psalm 23 over it all: “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death...”

My eyes were closed and I was sitting back in a lazy boy as we sang this song, and during that song bearing all my burdens and questions, fears and uncertainties I offered a prayer, or the closest I came to prayer: “God, if you exist, here I am.” In that moment I was quite overcome by a feeling of Something Greater. It was like being enveloped by Light, my whole person being known inside and out and held, washed in a flood of what I could only describe as love. I wrote in my journal shortly after that experience that I wanted to be a capital-L “Lover” when I grew up, one who committed himself to sharing God's love with the world.

When I was in middle school, I visited the school counselor about every week, sometimes twice, as I dealt with the depression and fear of schoolyard bullies. It was not the counselor that brought about change, but it was this experience. When I knew that I was loved, embraced, known by

God, my tormenters lost their power. The words of that prayer began to sink in: “There’s an almost unbelievable goodness that helps us face the fierce unknown.” And that’s a big part of the message of Easter. On this great feast of the church, we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus Christ—the power of life overcoming the shadow of death. The triumph of the power of God’s Light over the deceptive guise of darkness and deceit.

There is a legend from the Orient about a traveler making his way to a large city. One night he meets two other travelers along the road – Fear and Plague. Plague explains to the traveler that, once they arrived, they are expected to kill 10,000 people in the city. The traveler asks Plague if Plague would do all the killing. “Oh, no,” responded Plague. “I shall kill only a few hundred. My friend Fear will kill the others.”

Fear is a powerful force that discourages, overwhelms, and spiritually strangles us. No matter what age, no matter what social class, or what you’ve been through or are going through, fear is a force we all encounter. There are personal fears like the fear of change, fear of failure, fear of not being loved, fear of embarrassment. There are other fears like fear of war and disasters, fear of societal collapse, fear of pollution destroying our earth. Then the more personal fears. Perhaps you and your partner or spouse have been together for years and there’s some unspoken tension, leading to uneasiness and fights. You’re afraid if you will make it through this. Perhaps your company has been going through difficult times and there are rumors of a buyout or you’ve recently lost your job. Perhaps you are waiting on the results from a medical test or waiting for that important doctors visit.

To these fears I say remember: There’s an almost unbelievable goodness that helps us face the fierce unknown. That almost unbelievable goodness is the present, loving, embracing, healing presence of Christ. If the power of Christ’s Resurrection is more powerful than death and darkness, surely the presence of Christ in our lives can sustain us through the “fierce unknown” of this earthly journey.

We however try and walk the journey alone. It is easy to not pray each day. It is easy to sleep in on Sunday, rather than going to church. We say to ourselves, I have the woods where I feel close to God, or I have this club, or my family. And we think we are fine. Christmas and Easter are nice times to celebrate, but we feel fine the rest of the year. We don’t need church...until we do. Tragedy brings us home to God. The death of a family member. Being diagnosed with a terminal illness. Natural disasters or events like 9-11. We come together as a community to support one another in love and faith through these challenges and churches are packed. And we gather together at church because deep down we know there’s a truth to that “unbelievable goodness” that the priest preached about on Easter Sunday. Our gut says the world doesn’t really offer the depth of healing we seek. But the gathering of church is year-round. That almost unbelievable goodness is more than a salve for moments of tragedy, but a force that can shape us if we surrender to the daily walk with God, the deepening of our faith through journeying in community with one another. More than God wants us to just come to church, God longs for us to be his church.

Nikki, Hailey, and James today have together chosen to be initiated through the ancient rite of baptism into full membership in life of the Church. They have taken a new, bold step forward

into the newness of life that comes in Baptism. And they have chosen to give themselves over to this power of God in their lives, to be marked as Christ's own forever. As St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?"

And so my Easter prayer for all of us today is that just as 2000 years ago Christ overcame the power of death in the mystery of the Resurrection, that we might surrender our lives to God's life-giving Spirit day-to-day, not just in times of celebration and times of tragedy, but that each and everyday we might be open to that deep and healing transformation that comes through walking the path together, hand-in-hand, as community, as fellow sojourners along the Way.
Alleluia! Christ is risen!