

After Easter: What's Next?

We've been talking about how hard it is to keep the Easter Buzz going—to continue celebrating resurrection once we leave worship on Easter Sunday—after the family dinners are over and the Easter egg hunts are done and the kids' sugar high wears off. How do we continue to celebrate resurrection on Easter Monday?

And, last week I suggested that we can keep the hope and the celebration going by considering who God is: a God of ongoing creation whose very nature and identity are summed up in God's own words: "I am always making all things new." That's who God is; and that identity gives us hope.

Today I want to offer another perspective about the hope we have because of Easter—about how resurrection becomes an every-day awareness.

Psalms 118 is one good place to start. It probably is a processional psalm written following a military victory. It is written as a liturgy of thanksgiving for a procession of the king and the people into the Temple courts. It begins with an invocation in the form of a litany, similar to our call to worship:

Leader: O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good;
his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say,
People: "His steadfast love endures forever."
Leader: Let the house of Aaron say,
People: "His steadfast love endures forever."
Leader: Let those who fear the LORD say,
People: "His steadfast love endures forever."

Then the psalmist (speaking perhaps on behalf of the king; but more likely on behalf of the community) describes how the people confidently sought God's help when an enemy threatened their life.

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| <p>⁵ Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.</p> <p>⁶ With the LORD on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?</p> <p>⁷ The LORD is on my side to help me;</p> | <p>I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.</p> <p>⁸ It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in mortals.</p> <p>⁹ It is better to take refuge in the LORD than to put confidence in princes.</p> |
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Then the liturgy vividly recounts God's rescue.

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| <p>¹⁰ All nations surrounded me; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!</p> <p>¹¹ They surrounded me, surrounded me on every side; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!</p> | <p>¹² They surrounded me like bees; they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!</p> <p>¹³ I was pushed hard, so that I was falling, but the LORD helped me.</p> |
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Next comes a dialogue (probably at the Temple gates) between the priests

and the psalmist (likely the victorious king).

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my might;
he has become my salvation.

¹⁵ There are glad songs of victory in the tents
of the righteous:

"The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

¹⁶ the right hand of the LORD is exalted;
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly."

¹⁷ I shall not die, but I shall live,
and recount the deeds of the LORD.

Finally, the psalmist (or the king) enters to offer the thanksgiving sacrifice.

"I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD." A good post-Easter proclamation for us today. I want to suggest that if we can experience resurrection hope by acknowledging who God is, we also can find hope in what God does: "I will recount the deeds of the Lord."

Lent was a time of spiritual discipline: fasting and prayer, self-evaluation, focus, resolve. Hopefully, Easter wasn't seen as the end of that season of spiritual discipline, but, rather, as a transition from a discipline focused on preparation and anticipation to a discipline focused on recognizing and recounting the "deeds of the Lord" in our lives and in this world. It makes sense that before we can recount the deeds of the Lord we have to experience them.

Patty Methvin was our youth director in Harrison, and she was the best. It was from her that I first heard the idea of "God sightings:" "Where have you seen God, today—last week?" Every Sunday night during youth group, she would ask, "Who wants to share a 'God Sighting' this week?" "How did you experience God?" and the kids would share: sometimes just one or two, and sometimes it was hard to get them stopped.

Almost every week somebody would say, "I saw God in *nature*: a cabin in the woods or on the lake; a sunset, or a summer breeze. And there'd be a soft murmur of affirmation: "Yeah! There was God!"

Occasionally someone would say, "I saw God in a *child*. ...innocent smiles, giggles, cute things. And there'd be smiles and nodding heads—especially from the adult sponsors. "Yeah. There was God!"

Sometimes somebody had experienced God in *music*: a concert, a new CD—some Christian rock group. "Ah yes," would sing the chorus. "There was God."

One Sunday night an older girl—a newcomer to the group—said hesitantly: "Last Tuesday morning as I was getting ready to go to school, I had an incredible compulsion to go see my father. Normally I'm not very spontaneous, and I really don't even like my father." She shared that her father was an alcoholic and had kept the family in turmoil until her mother finally divorced him and he moved out.

She said, "I hadn't seen or spoken to my father in over a year; but the

feeling was overwhelming; so, I gathered my books and drove to his house. I found him on the floor, having a heart attack. I called 911 and he survived."

There was an uncomfortable shifting of feet. This was *unexpected*. Someone whispered, "Holy smoke!" Pleasant sunsets, laughing children, heavenly-sounding music tucked their tails and slipped under the table in embarrassed insignificance.

It was unexpected. I wonder whether our own difficulty—the problems of the "spiritually yearning but institutionally disillusioned public"—the reason it seems so difficult to experience God's presence is we don't expect to do so?

"I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD." Maybe when we recount the deeds of the Lord our expectations are too low? *Of course*, we can recount the deeds of a creator! Anybody can see and appreciate a flower or a sunset; but are we caught totally off guard by experiences of God's presence and God's deeds that we can't explain? We just don't expect to experience God?

In a small town out in western Oklahoma several years ago there was a serious drought. The farmers were desperate. Crops were burning up; cattle were dying. There were three churches in the town, and one week when the ministers gathered at the local coffee shop, one of them suggested they hold a city-wide meeting to pray for rain.

The idea was well-received, and so a date and time was set, and the high school auditorium was reserved for the occasion. The local weekly newspaper put it on the front page, and flyers were distributed door-to-door.

In the town there was a woman named Mildred who was a kind of outcast. It was a dry county—very conservative—and Mildred had opened a liquor store just across the county line, which was only a few hundred feet from the city limit.

She had visited all the churches but had received a cold shoulder in each congregation. So she was something of a recluse.

On the night of the prayer meeting a large crowd gathered early. The room was full and buzzing as the people visited. Just before the service was to begin, Mildred came in. The only seats left were up front, so here she goes, prancing down the center aisle—*prancing; that's the way Mrs. Briley from the Presbyterian church described it later*. As the people became aware of her, they grew quiet—not so much from the fact that she dared show up; but because she was the only one who came with an umbrella.