

After Easter: What's Next?

Some of you are old enough to remember week-long revival meetings. I even remember two-week ones. People got all worked up; a lot of crying; people got saved (sometimes more than once). The success of the meeting was generally determined by how many baptisms took place at the end of the revival.

That kind of evangelism outlived its effectiveness fifty years ago; in fact, there is significant data to suggest that it has become counterproductive: it runs off more people than it attracts. Still, some churches continue to host revivals.

Even in the 1960s, when I was breaking into ministry, preaching youth revivals, there was the criticism that revivals got people all worked up and revived and renewed; but two weeks later it all had worn off.

For the last two weeks we've considered whether Easter has "worn off." Is there still a tingle of awe and wonder triggered by the mystery of resurrection? Do we continue to sense the excitement of life renewed and promises fulfilled? Or did it all wear off with the kids' sugar high from all those candy eggs?

How do we keep it going—that sense of God's presence and leading—that sense of confidence in the promise of new life? How do we keep the "buzz" going?

One source is the awareness of who God is: the One who not only is creator, redeemer, and sustainer of all that is, but who also is always making all things new.

And we've said another source of ongoing resurrection hope is a awareness of what God does. We remain alert for "God Sightings:" There Is God.

After worship last Sunday Myrna shared a story from her time on the Regional Staff of the Christian Church in Arkansas. Barbara was our new Regional Minister, and within a few weeks of her installation three separate congregations discovered that their Youth Ministers had sexually abused some of their youth.

Some congregations stopped giving to the region. In early staff meeting Barbara shared that the bank account was dangerously low; that she was forgoing her salary that month and asked other staff members to consider what they could do.

Later in that same staff meeting the mail arrived, and in the mail was a check for \$25K. Coincidence? Or a "God Sighting?"

Jo Lynn noted that my first two post-Easter sermons focused on Who God is and What God does; and suggested I continue with When, Where, and How. I took it as a challenge. Today I want ask when do we know if what we're seeing is truly a manifestation the presence of the one who is always making all things new.

In Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," Ebenezer Scrooge is confronted by the ghost of his late business partner, Jacob Marley, and understandably is

terrified. His response is, "You're nothing but a spot of mustard; a bit of undigested ham!" How do we know whether our awareness is truly a God-sighting or just last night's pizza?

In the Hebrew Scriptures is the story of Jacob: son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. Early in his life his wheeling and dealing got him in trouble and he had to leave town. He headed north, and one night he had a dream: there was a ladder set on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. Angels of God were ascending and descending on the ladder. And the LORD stood beside him and said,

GENESIS 28: 13-17 (NRSV) *"I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will* | *keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* ¹⁶*Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!"* ¹⁷*And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven."*

"Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" Sometimes the awareness of God is a total ambush, recognized only in retrospect. I frequently say I have 20/20 hindsight when it comes to recognizing God's presence and sensing the fulfillment of resurrection hope.

So, in one respect we don't control when that awareness comes. God will do what God will do. God comes in our dreams, and in sudden, unexpected epiphanies.

What we're really talking about, in theological terms, is revelation; but, it's not really a matter of when God comes. God's self-disclosure is constant. The issue is not when God appears. The issue is when do we recognize that self-disclosure.

There is a great spiritual hunger in America today. People are hungry to experience God in their lives, and they're looking to satisfy that hunger in many different ways—most of which are ineffective.

Some try Eastern mysticism. Some just give up religion altogether and try to fill their emptiness with material possessions and sensual pleasures. The one thing that is consistent among those who make up the "spiritually hungry, institutionally disillusioned public" is that they don't think they will satisfy that spiritual hunger by relating to organized religion.

But mental and emotional disorders are on the rise—especially among the young. Valium, aspirin and muscle relaxers are consumed by the ton on a daily basis. Nothing seems to be working

Scripture has a lot to say about that spiritual hunger and the fruitless quest to fill it: 700 years before Jesus was born, the prophet, Isaiah was writing, "Why

do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” (Isaiah 55:2)

Matthew records Jesus' words: *“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ⁸For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who seeks finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (MATT. 7:7-11)*

In the Epistle of James we read, *“You do not have, because you do not ask. ³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. (JAMES 4:2-3)*

Are you picking up a pattern here? We ask for peace and happiness; we ask for God to heal our loved one; we ask God to do this, to fix that... We ask for what God can do for us—and on our timeline. What we may not ask for is to know what God wants from us in a given situation. What we may not do is listen.

There's a lot of focus in social media on taking care of yourself. At one level, that's good. The song asks, “How I be right for somebody else if I'm not right for me?” The flight attendant always says, “Put on your own oxygen mask first.” But too many people stop there. When I am the center—the focus—the intended purpose and end of my seeking, the satisfaction is shallow, and the fulfillment is brief.

Last week I was struggling with the PowerPoint. It wouldn't transfer to the screens. I went into the settings, and the one I was looking for wouldn't even come up. I rebooted the computer; I rebooted the whole system. Nothing was working. Stacey walked in about that time, reached over my shoulder and plugged in the HDMI cord that had worked its way loose from the back of the computer. Bingo.

When my focus was on the screens and what I wanted to happen there, all I got was frustration. Stacey reconnected the screens to their source. The Psalmist wrote, simply, “Be still and know that I am God.” **When** that happens, we move into the who, what, and when of God's presence, and we open ourselves up the Power who is always making all things new. We open ourselves to the possibility of experiencing resurrection—here—**now**. Jesus summed it up like this:

MATTHEW 6:25-33 (NRSV) *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, ‘What will we eat?’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear?’ ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But seek first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*