

Reflection for the Celtic Service—Ben Sparks
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, VA
Easter Day, April 21, 2019

On Easter weekend in 1964 my family and I were at my aunt's house, where we had gathered at Christmas and Easter for several years after my father died. She and my uncle lived in a small mill town in Georgia, and were active members of St. Mark's Episcopal Church in nearby LaGrange, a larger mill town, the home of Calloway Mills and LaGrange College. As a consequence, we Presbyterians from Atlanta became practicing Episcopalians on those holidays, welcomed into the fold at St. Mark's Church.

In 1964 I was also a student here in Richmond at Union Presbyterian Seminary. When we weren't exegeting Greek and Hebrew or reading theology, we were up to our eyeballs in the Civil Rights movement. Many of us that winter had joined a 24 hour a day vigil with other seminarians along the east coast in support of the Civil Rights Act. We would drive up to DC, check in at a local church, then be dropped off at the Lincoln Memorial where four of us would stand silently for one hour. Fifteen yards away from us stood members of the American Nazi Party, also keeping vigil -- **against** the passage of the Act. They showed up in khaki uniforms with swastikas; Lutherans, Episcopalians, and Catholics wore clerical collars.

To say these were tense times was an understatement, but for us, they were heady and hopeful. It had only been a few months since Kennedy's assassination, after which the wives of several Union students, who taught in county schools, returned to campus that afternoon with shocking tales of their own students erupting in applause when the tragic news was announced over the intercom. In the seminary kitchen employees heard the report of his death on the radio. They were wailing. . .singing, and crying out to Jesus for mercy.

At St. Mark's in LaGrange we filed into our usual pew. The service began: "Jesus Christ is Risen Today," and the choir and rector proceeded to the chancel. Immediately after the hymn, latecomers, who were African American, were ushered in and seated near the front. I remember being uplifted, encouraged up at the sight. Here, I thought, in fact was the promise of the kingdom -- made visible.

A few moments into Easter worship, perhaps after the prayer of confession (what I remember now is the silence) a man seated directly across the aisle from our pew shouted out: "I'm so 'bleeping' tired of these (n-word) coming in here."

The years have erased other details from that day, but a few vivid memories remain: my uncle, who was seated on the aisle, walked over to the man, squeezed into the pew beside him, and spoke to him quietly.

At the reading of the gospel, the rector, instead of standing in the nave below the chancel steps, walked all the way down the aisle and stood beside the pew. From there, as he read the Easter scripture, he turned from time to time and looked directly at the man, almost as though he were reading the words to him alone.

After the rector climbed into the pulpit (“in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit”) and the congregation seated, the sermon began. A few paragraphs in the sermon, the man cried out, plaintively, “But we do try, don’t we?”

After worship I saw a conversation; a few men of the church gathered around the man who had cried out. Turns out he was a sociology professor at LaGrange College, and not a member of St. Mark’s. He was not rejected. In spite of, even because of his ungodly offense -- the outrageous violation of that holy space on that holy day -- members reached out to succor and embrace him. Just as eagerly as they reached out to welcome anew their African American members.

I wish I had possessed the spiritual and theological maturity to recognize then what I now believe: that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not only -- nor primarily -- about getting all of us into heaven. . .and eternal life. I do trust in that promise now, as I experience the frailty of advancing years.

But what I now understand and witnessed that Easter Day in 1964, proclaimed in deed and action -- not only in word and song -- was Resurrection’s power to transform life **in the present tense**. . .not only for the future. (Those who believe in me, said Jesus, will never die.) It’s taken me so many years to understand.

It also took the disciples a while, as we heard in tonight’s lesson. The disciples dismissed the women’s report as an idle tale.

What I witnessed in 1964 was evidence of Resurrection’s transforming power, a quiet foreshadowing of the witness of Bloody Sunday in Selma a year later, and of the testimony of Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston in 2015 to the murder of their pastor and members in a bible study, into which had been welcomed a hate filled white terrorist who murdered them. That church rose up and forgave Wade Clark Roof -- in living proof of the resurrection.

Each week, in the dismissal at this Celtic Service, we are admonished to live in that same resurrection power: “Return no one evil for evil.” Dear God, let it be so.