



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, April 26, 2020
The Third Sunday of Easter

Solemn Eucharist
at 11:00 a.m.

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Matthew Moretz, *Associate Rector*
on
Acts 2:14a, 36-41; 1 Peter 1:17-23; and Luke 24:17-23
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The Puzzle of Easter

I get to watch my one-year-old, Samuel, a lot more these days. My role as his caregiver has expanded considerably during this crisis. Being homebound, I am bound to him ever more closely. Over the course of a day, I have the privilege of seeing him discover our world, piece by piece. He knows how to say “toast” and “shoes,” and he knows what he’s talking about. He races to the sink when we tell him it is time to brush his teeth. He loves a white cat in one of his books. Every time we turn to her page, he has to kiss her.

It is impressive to see him learn about something, and have no need to discover the “why” of it, or how it fits into the world. He appreciates and loves something for what it is, unencumbered by the value that I would place on it. Almost every day he chooses something that fits in the palm of his hand, like a milk jug cap, and holds it all day, like a lucky charm, or like a friend.

I could name a thousand more pieces of our world that he has found. He’s barely begun to put these puzzle pieces together. At the moment, he’s just taking all those discoveries and delights and laying them on the table of his mind, piece by piece for later sorting. In every case, he finds satisfaction in knowing the piece, and joy in recognizing it again later on. It’s not that he misses the forest for the trees, he just doesn’t know what a forest is yet, and trees are great!

But there is a dark side to all this. Yes, a dark side: the real frustration, and even fury, that comes when Sam doesn’t understand or recognize something. He has an actual puzzle, for example, of various shapes that fit into various matching holes. When he keeps trying to place a star shaped piece into a cross shaped hole, and it just doesn’t fit, it is not too long before he throws the piece away as if it were a hot potato, or he turns over the whole puzzle in a fit of pique, moving on to something less troubling. If he would just be a bit more patient during all this, if he could just weather the storm in his heart that occurs while the piece doesn’t fit, he would be able to keep at it, and then when he finally discovers how the piece fits, the delight will be his. Another piece of the world is then his to cherish.

Sometimes I help him, sometimes I guide his hand, so that the star shaped piece makes its way into the star shaped hole, so he can feel that delight, and then be that much more encouraged to keep at it, to know more, to learn more, to grow in a way that he can see how all of the puzzle fits together.

We talk about the mystery of Easter, but I think it is fair to call it the puzzle of Easter, at least at first glance. And there are so many first glances of Jesus by his disciples and friends, so many times when they recognized him after his death, a wide variety of encounters one in a garden, another in the upper room, another on a sea shore, so

many pieces of the puzzle, so many that we take fifty days to lay them out to get that complete picture, week by week.

For today, there are two pieces of the Easter puzzle that we are holding, the first is when two disciples meet the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. And the second is when Peter speaks to thousands of people in Jerusalem about the risen Christ on the day of Pentecost. In each reading, we witness people failing to recognize Jesus somehow. The two disciples on the road, in a delicious bit of irony, tell their sad story of Jesus to Jesus himself, as if he were a stranger. And they have to walk with him quite a way before they realize this. Less than two months later, Peter is addressing the Judeans of Jerusalem, carefully walking them through the chain of events, how they had failed to recognize Jesus, much less ironically, indeed tragically. In broad daylight, they had crucified the one who God had raised from the dead, discovered to be Lord and Christ.

In both cases, there is this reference to a struggle at the heart. When the unrecognized Jesus is talking to the disciples on the road, they say afterwards that their hearts were burning within them. When Peter tells the crowd of their failure to recognize the Lord of Life, it is written that their hearts are pricked.

This is a crucial moment for all of them, that moment when their lack of recognition is painful, when the pieces don't fit the way they used to, and a choice is before them: throw the pieces away in a fit, or take the pieces and work them into a new complete picture of the world. In both readings, we are grateful to witness people who push through this discomfort. The disciples stick with this stranger while their hearts burn, then they recognize him at the end of their journey.

The crowd of Judeans don't leave or attack Peter, they engage by asking him, "What do we do now?" And in both cases, their response in encountering Jesus back from the dead is repentance, a turning of the heart to new life, and then taking up their ministry, a turning of their bodies down a new path. In the two disciples' case, it is going back the way they came, to Jerusalem, despite the risk to their lives, to get back to work in Jesus' name. In the crowd's case, they all became baptized, embracing and sharing in the reality of Jesus' death and resurrection, leaving the corrupt generation that killed him, joining a new family that recognizes him for who he is.

There must have been such delight and joy in both cases, such exhilaration of finding a lost, now found, piece of the puzzle, a living, once dead piece, that told them to flip the whole grey puzzle over to reveal the vivid colors that had been on the back of every piece from the very beginning. All of that fear, anxiety, sorrow, misrecognition and regret was transfigured with a turning, with a flip of the heart, into hope for the future thanks to the Easter Triumph that had upended the power of death with the power of God's eternal love. In Christ's return, and in their accepting it, their lives now fit into the grand puzzle of life, death, love, now reframed by the resurrection, and shot through with the colors of eternal life.

But that insight was hard won. That hard time had to come first. It seems that spiritual knowledge, even for Jesus' closest disciples, even for the people who were there when they crucified our Lord, it seems that their faith was formed largely after the fact, especially bitter ones, at that. Isn't that how everything is, though, for we who are mired in time? We can't know birth, life, love, grief or death, until after the fact. We can't know the release of Easter, until we have collapsed under the weight of Good Friday. We can't know what this health and economic crisis will teach us until after the fact, how this Age of Extremity fits into the puzzle of our lives. This is why patience, courage, and endurance is so very important as we run the race that is set before us, whether it is this particular one, this marathon of stillness, or whether it is our entire lives, a picture we can only know, like Easter, until after the fact. That spiritual knowledge will be hard won as well. Even if someone travelled in time from the future to tell us, we would only be able to understand a bit of it until we have lived it ourselves.

So, my sisters and brothers, may we wait, take courage, and endure until that Easter day when we meet again (don't know where, don't know when), until we have seen this through to the end, until we are able stop, look around, take a breath, share a meal together, and gasp in astonishment that God had been walking beside us the entire time, hidden in broad daylight.