

**Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
RCL Lectionary, Year B
April 26th, 2009**

**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Practicing Easter

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

There's nothing like a vacation to refresh my perspective on where I live. Last week, I was resting in the slow-moving, spacious, quiet climes of northern Missouri. This past Tuesday morning, I found myself stuck behind traffic on East Blithedale. Everyone, including me, was anxious to get the children to school on time, and I ended up in the way of a cross street. A large, sleek, late-model SUV was at the corner wanting to turn left onto Blithedale, and I was. . . quite simply. . . in the way. The incident that ensued reminded me I was home – a rather stern look and then a lecture from the other driver about my bad manners for blocking her way, her time, her schedule, and her needs with my old, rattling '97 Civic and my five-year-old in back. Only thing was, the lecture was silent, and I'm not very good at reading lips. No one lowered any windows. I backed up to get out of her way, chagrined and recognizing where I belonged in the pecking order. Yes, I was home. Back to the frenetic, the frantic, the familiar.

By the weekend I was fraught trying to keep up with the pile of work. My wife and I had been around the track a few times over my habitual re-enactment of the story of Noah in our kitchen by putting too much soap in the dishwasher. I was under pressure of several missed deadlines and exhausted, and by yesterday morning, my e-mail at the office just wasn't working. I ran home to get the car, burst through the doorway and told my family I was going to hear the Dalai Lama! Well, it was about time, wasn't it? Fortunately, it wasn't just a dream. He was coming to speak at Cal, and a friend had invited me to go. Before I dashed back to the car to drive and meet my host in the East Bay, Daniel even offered me God's blessing. But as I drove over to Berkeley, I wondered what had happened to me and Easter, the joys of Eastertide, the assurance of resurrection and redemption?

And so, on a beautiful Northern California spring day yesterday afternoon, I joined 8,000 other lucky people in the Greek Theatre to hear the Dalai Lama. The motorcade's arrival prompted a standing ovation, and after the opening celebrity pleasantries, there was the best-known monk in the world in his Tibetan red on the stage, slowly taking off his shoes and tucking his seventy-something-year-old legs under him in a large armchair. With an almost other-worldly calm, a chuckle, and amusing exchanges with his attentive interpreter, the Dalai Lama then slowly proceeded to unpack his thoughts with an enraptured audience for over an hour-and-a-half. The theme was simple: the centrality of compassion in building a peaceful life and planet.

About the time he began to talk about the place of forgiveness in compassion, the woman seated behind me in the cement stadium seating kicked over her water cup, leaving me sitting in a cold puddle. And it was at that moment that I had to chuckle. The quiet voice and the simple message of a revered leader-in-exile lofting sweetly through the air, mingling with the wind in the trees before a sea students uncertain about their future, faculty worried for their jobs, people caught up in recession. . . Well, it was all reminding me are more important things in life than a wet bum. And the Dalai Lama called us to remember that our perceptions are not reality, and the sooner we get that, the better off the world will be. Then I had to smile in a way that would stick with me for the rest of the day. For despite a week of trying to catch up with my illusions, overflowing dishwashers,

angry SUV-drivers, and my damp behind, I began to understand today's Easter gospel – even Easter itself – through the wisdom of a Tibetan Buddhist monk.

In today's gospel from Luke, the first disciples are discussing resurrection, batting back and forth the experiences some of them had of encountering the Risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. . . when Jesus suddenly appears among them – unexpected and uninvited – and he talks of peace. They react at first with fear and alarm, the familiar response of humanity to the unexpected and the unbidden, to the illusion of control shattered. The Risen Christ is no longer a story or an abstraction – no longer a controllable perception, the embellished story of a few, or simply a theological principle. Like true peace and compassion, like the practice of the best of our tradition, resurrection is immutably practical, overturning our perceptions and distortions of God's grace with a simple request for something to eat, a demand that we touch the fleshiness of our Savior, seeking the eyes, hands, and love of Christ in the incarnate witness, the new life died and risen in Christ through baptism, sitting right next to us. . . across the kitchen table. . . blessing us. . . sometimes swearing at us. . . driving that SUV. . . accidentally kicking the water cup over and getting our seats wet. And in all of that, teaching us the great abundance of new life, of learning to live in community with God's creation, and overturning our narrow notions and abstract intellectualizations with an embodied presence that says, "Touch and know!" And then asks, "Have you anything here to eat?"

The Risen Christ instructs us in today's Gospel on the practical implications of Easter: stay here, even in the midst of dangers, even in the city of crucifixion, and proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Put another way, live into the practice of compassion Christ has shown us, the peace over warfare, the Good News over the evils and violence of the world. Live into the messiness of life, in the midst of the good and bad, and embody the Good News of resurrection by cultivating peace as we await the arrival of the Spirit that is promised to re-make everything. Sounds like a call to stick with it here in Mill Valley.

I think the Dalai Lama would understand this Gospel. In a profound sense, sitting yesterday afternoon in a packed theatre, I heard in his words the words of the Easter life calling. The Dalai Lama has much more than I do to resent, much more than I do to make him fraught. His people suffer from incessant occupation and a constant threat to their peaceful way of life. He is at one level a leader-in-exile, eyed with suspicion, whisked from city to city and continent to continent by motorcade and a phalanx of security for his mortal life is constantly under threat. Yet he sits and chuckles, jokes with the teeming masses who come out to greet him, imparts a simple, profound wisdom that Jesus would surely recognize. In a deep way, he strikes me as an Easter person. He endeavors, in the words of our tradition, to see the world as it truly must be seen through God's eyes -- not through the illusions that we are alone and isolated, not through the delusions of worldly power -- but rather in the humility and grace of truth: interconnectedness, our interdependence, that the whole human family is one "we", and all of Creation is of a piece.

The Risen Christ discloses to his disciples and us this truth – cosmic yet practical and liberating, tangible and imminent. In the resurrection, God's grace has won. In Christ, peace will always win and has already won, even if much of the world continues to choose war. In Christ, compassion will ultimately rule even if evil and hatred and division continue to dance their ever-decreasing spiral for a time. Repentance, redemption, and resurrection are here for the taking in the engagement of loving community, in the compassion of truth shared and lived out, of hearts opened and transformed, of the broken bread shared and the common cup passed. And we are invited, along with the first disciples, to engage in this deep work of our tradition – new for our spiritual ancestors, and new for us each year at this time – the simple but profound work of practicing being an Easter people. *Amen.*