

Third Sunday of Easter: Sunday, April 15, 2018

The Collect:

O God, whose blessed Son made himself known to his disciples in the breaking of bread: Open the eyes of our faith, that we may behold him in all his redeeming work; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

First Lesson: Acts 3:12-19

¹²When Peter saw it, he addressed the people, 'You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made him walk? ¹³The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. ¹⁴But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, ¹⁵and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. ¹⁶And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. ¹⁷ 'And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. ¹⁸In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. ¹⁹Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out,

Psalm: Psalm 4

¹ Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause; *
you set me free when I am hard-pressed;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer.

² "You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory; *
how long will you worship dumb idols
and run after false gods?"

³ Know that the Lord does wonders for the faithful; *

when I call upon the Lord, he will hear me.

⁴ Tremble, then, and do not sin; *

 speak to your heart in silence upon your bed.

⁵ Offer the appointed sacrifices *

 and put your trust in the Lord.

⁶ Many are saying, "Oh, that we might see better times!" *

 Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O Lord.

⁷ You have put gladness in my heart, *

 more than when grain and wine and oil increase.

⁸ I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep; *

 for only you, Lord, make me dwell in safety.

Epistle: 1 John 3:1-7

¹See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God;

and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not

know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been

revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for

we will see him as he is. ³And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just

as he is pure.

⁴ Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵You know

that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. ⁶No one who

abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. ⁷Little

children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous,

just as he is righteous.

Gospel: Luke 24:36b-48

³⁶ While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to

them, 'Peace be with you.' ³⁷They were startled and terrified, and thought that

they were seeing a ghost. ³⁸He said to them, 'Why are you frightened, and why do

doubts arise in your hearts? ³⁹Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.’ ⁴⁰And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. ⁴¹While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, ‘Have you anything here to eat?’ ⁴²They gave him a piece of broiled fish, ⁴³and he took it and ate in their presence.

⁴⁴ Then he said to them, ‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ ⁴⁵Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, ⁴⁶and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. ⁴⁸You are witnesses of these things.

God is Change – A Sermon for St. John’s Episcopal Church, Minneapolis

by The Rev. Craig Peter Lemming, Curate

Sunday, April 15, 2018 – Third Sunday of Easter

When we were children, my parents did not allow us to stay up late, except on Friday night. Mum, Dad, and Miguel did not care for science fiction, so they would go to bed after *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and I’d stay up to watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. I can still hear the gravitas in Sir Patrick Stewart’s voice:

Space: the final frontier. These are the voyages of the starship *Enterprise*. Its continuing mission: to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.¹

¹ <https://youtu.be/3QXBaW711WU>

As a child, I didn't know why I was so intrigued by *Star Trek*, but now I think I do. As a mixed-race child growing up in post-colonial Zimbabwe, I suspect that I was intrigued by the ways this futuristic community knit itself together in kinship across its many lines of difference: different species, races, languages, cultures, ages, abilities, genders, and modes of being. Honoring these differences created challenges to the ways the humans made meaning of relationship, belonging, and their purpose of existing in the face of impossible struggles. Now as a 36-year-old Priest, the starship *Enterprise's* mission "to seek out new life" and "to boldly go where no one has gone before" speaks to me in new ways as I contemplate its connection to the mystery of Christ's Resurrection.

Octavia Butler was an African-American science fiction writer, recipient of the Hugo and Nebula awards on multiple occasions, and the first science fiction writer to receive a MacArthur Fellowship also known as the "Genius Grant."² Just as the Gospel according to Luke places shepherds, women, the blind, the sick, the demon-possessed, lepers, widows, epileptics, the crippled, foreigners and social outcasts like Samaritans, Syro-Phoenicians, adulterers, tax-collectors, criminals, and the poor at the center of the Good News of Jesus Christ; in her own prophetic

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octavia_E._Butler

literature, Octavia Butler also chose the most marginalized to be the protagonists in her masterpieces. Defying white supremacy's commitment to exterminating minorities Octavia Butler envisioned those who are Black and Brown and Female as the subjects of the future. If Luke's Gospel is the Good News for all outcasts, Octavia Butler's work is the Good News for our present-day Movements for Black Lives, Women's Lives, LGBTQ Lives, Immigrant Lives, and the lives of those of us who love to think. These visionary works – the good news of St. Luke, the good news of St. Octavia, and the good news of *Star Trek* – as different as they all may seem, each boldly proclaim that those existing on the brink of extermination will not only survive into the future but will have new life and have it abundantly.

Today we heard a passage from end of the Gospel according to Luke. Luke's small community of marginalized Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians lived in terror; on the brink of annihilation. Like Octavia Butler, they shared, recorded, told, and retold stories of Resurrection to resist and to defy the Roman Empire's blood-thirsty campaigns to crush the early Christian movement. As followers of Jesus gather to share and relish the joyful mystery of the Risen Christ on the Road to Emmaus, Jesus stands in the midst of them; greets them, "Peace be with you;" shows them his hands and his feet; and invites them to look, to touch, to see, and to know that Christ is alive. My favorite phrase in this passage states, "**While in**

their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering.”³ I love this phrase because it captures my own feelings this Eastertide: in my joy I too am disbelieving and still wondering. Disbelieving when I witness sacred human lives being crucified daily by systemic evil and empirical violence; and disbelieving that Spring will arrive as we endure yet another ruthless Minnesota blizzard. And yet, despite my disbelief, I have no control over the joy, wonder, and new life I experience when a stranger smiles at me unexpectedly, or when love suddenly kindles in my heart, or when the spell-binding beauty of this morning’s prelude⁴ results in tears of gratitude.

You may be wondering what *Star Trek* and Octavia Butler’s sci-fi novels have to do with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and Eastertide. When Luke’s early Christian community proclaimed that their beloved, crucified friend literally stood before them, spoke with them, allowed them to touch his hands and his feet, and that they witnessed him enjoying a meal in their presence – in that story shared, recorded, told, retold, and now still proclaimed – the eternally present Spirit of the Risen Christ made and makes all things new⁵ in the face of life’s impossible struggles. Sharing in the real presence of the Risen Christ, Luke’s community did

³ Luke 24:41 (NRSV).

⁴ <https://youtu.be/Rn7cZikt8Do>

⁵ Revelation 21:5.

indeed go forth “to explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life and new civilizations, to boldly go where no one has gone before.” Jesus teaches, **“that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in Christ’s name to all nations.”**⁶ When we repent, which means, when we return to becoming our true selves; when we forgive others and accept that we are forgiven for seeking our own selfish will thereby distorting our relationship with God, ourselves, each other, and all creation,⁷ then we are restored to God’s will, which is wholeness, right relationship, and new life. When we heed the Psalmist’s message today and stop worshipping dumb idols and running after false gods; then we can trust again in the living God of mercy, who hears our prayers, who defends the cause of the hard-pressed, who puts gladness in our hearts and makes us dwell in safety.⁸

Holy Scripture and Science Fiction invite us to imagine and shape and build a marvelous new way of existence. A new life in which all people – from every nation, tribe, race, language, age, gender, ability, and mode of being – have life and share it abundantly together. Octavia Butler’s novel *Parable of the Sower* begins with these words:

⁶ Luke 24:47.

⁷ *The Book of Common Prayer*, 848.

⁸ Psalm 4.

**All that you touch
You change.**

**All that you Change
Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth
Is change.**

**God
Is change.⁹**

When we hear, touch, taste, and see the Risen Christ in Holy Eucharist: sacred scripture, bread, and wine are changed by us and we are changed by them. We become living members of Christ's Risen Body. New Life is inevitable and beyond our control. Whether we like it or not, whether we are ready for it or not, change is indeed the only lasting truth. In this season of Easter, the inexorable change from death to new life results in a complex mixture of sentiments: joy, doubt, wonder, disbelief, awe, and trust.

And so, on this Third Sunday of Easter, as we face the impossible struggles of this life together, "while in our joy we are disbelieving and still wondering," I close with the timeless words from Bernard Ighner's song, made famous by the incomparable Nina Simone:

⁹ Octavia E. Butler, *Parable Series*, vol. book 1, *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993), 3.

**Everything must change
Nothing stays the same
Everyone must change
No one stays the same**

**The young become the old
And mysteries do unfold
Cause that's the way of time
Nothing and no one goes unchanged**

**There are not many things in life you can be sure of
Except rain comes from the clouds
Sun lights up the sky
And hummingbirds do fly**

**Winter turns to spring
A wounded heart will heal
But never much too soon
Yes everything must change.¹⁰**

Amen.

¹⁰ <https://youtu.be/P9ycirYfmcY>