

Easter 3, Year A, 2014
St James Episcopal Church, St James NY
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Today is the third Sunday of Easter, the third Sunday
when we celebrate
the resurrection of our Savior.

The rest of our society has left Easter far behind,
moving on as soon as the Easter eggs were found
and the Easter dinner digested.

But we in the church, we spend fifty days
celebrating Easter, fifty days not in the lead up,
but following that great day,
telling the story
again and again.

And yesterday afternoon
I was listening to BBC Radio 4 online - it's great car radio.
And I heard a program
that helped me understand
why telling the story
again and again and again
is so important.

The commentator, a psychotherapist,
spoke about the power
of storytelling.

Storytelling, as she reminded us, is a human thing to do.
Stories
give us individual and cultural identity.
Before human beings could write, they passed on their accumulated learning
in stories and rituals.
And so stories that were told
came to shape people's understanding of the world -
and still do.

Our stories form us - you all know
how the stories that are told in our families
of what we were like as babies and young children, before we ourselves have any memories,
those stories

are so often a key to who we know ourselves to be.

And the stories we repeat to ourselves
continue to shape us, our self understanding, our view of the world.

On the program,
the commentator told us about a friend, who she called Jude.
Jude was a social worker,
dealing with kids in foster care.
There were three little brothers, aged nine, seven, and five.
They'd been taken from their parents when they were tiny,
and were bounced from foster home to foster home.
The only stories they had of their lives
was of fear, and abuse, and failure.
Eventually they were placed
with a youngish couple, and things were going really well.

Jude came to visit, because it looked like this placement
might become permanent - the foster parents wanted to adopt the boys.

And at the end of the visit, when it was all confirmed, she sat down with the boys.
“You will not be split up. You are going to stay here. We will find schools for you all. We are
going to start the adoption process.”

The boys were silent. They just stared at her.
So she asked them, “What did I just say?”

They said, “We will be split up. We have to leave here. There are no schools for us. No one will
ever adopt us.”

So she tried again, and again
their stories
blocked them from hearing her story.

Finally, the littlest one burst into tears.
“Why are you crying?” she asked.
“I think it is because I'm so happy.”

Eventually they all understood, but found it hard to take in.
If we've never had good news
it's as though we haven't got the neural pathways
to process it.
Like a muscle that never used

neural pathways for good news appear to be undeveloped
if we are not practiced in hearing it.
It is as though we cannot hear good news
as good news
at all.

Hearing good news, hearing good news stories, time and time again
effectively programs our brains
to be alert
for good news.

So, you may be wondering,
what on earth has this got to do
with Easter?

One of the things that many of us struggle with
with Easter
is whether it makes any difference.
Yes, it makes a difference when we die.
But in that case,
let's all just do what the Emperor Constantine did,
baptized on his death bed.
It effectively freed him
from any demands to live as a Christian;
he could confess it all
and die
and go straight to heaven.
At least, that was his theory.

But Scripture is clear.
The resurrection of Jesus Christ
makes a difference not just when we die
but here and now.
The risen Christ, through his Spirit,
gives life to us now.
Our lives have been changed;
we have been transformed.

That's the testimony of Scripture.
But how?
How does it happen?

And here, I think, is where
what I heard yesterday on the radio

comes in.

You see,
it's not simply that God works
directly, even magically, in us.
God works through our bodies, through our biology, through our chemistry.
God created us!
Is it any surprise then
that he created us
for resurrection?
That he created us
so that we would be able to incorporate his gift of life
into our lives?
That he created our brains, our neural pathways
to take advantage
of the story
of resurrection?

When we hear the story, when we tell it again and again,
we make pathways in our brains
for good news,
neural pathways
that allow us to hear it,
to process it,
to live it.

The stories we tell
shape us.
The stories we tell of resurrection
transform us.
They affect how we live, now.

And that's why we tell the stories of resurrection
again and again and again. Building the space in our brain
to hear good news,
not just of resurrection, but of promise and hope and life itself.

Which is exactly what happens
in our gospel today.
A story,
two men
walking away from Jerusalem,
away from the place

where Jesus had just been killed.
And as they walked
they talked,
as one does,
they talked about everything that had happened.
We can assume
that they were focussing
on the sad things, the betrayal, the death,
because when the man they met asked them
what they were talking about,
it says they stood still, looking sad.

But as they told him what they had been talking about
their story began to change.
Yes, they started with the sad things,
but then they began to talk about the other stories,
the women
and the empty tomb,
and then the man began to speak
and tell them the stories,
the stories that reached back
into the Hebrew Scriptures,
stories of promise and hope,
and then,
when they reached a village
he agreed
to stop over with them,
and he took bread, and blessed it, and broke it
and gave it.
And they recognized him,
it was Jesus!
And he disappeared,
and they rushed back to Jerusalem with a new story,
we have seen him alive!
And there they met the eleven,
and they had seen him too,
and story
piled upon story,
good news
upon good news,
and now we tell that story too,
good news
and good news, and more

good news.

But it's not only
in our story telling.
We also pray the good news.

That's what's going on
in our psalm today.

I love the LORD, because he has heard the voice of my
supplication,
because he has inclined his ear to me whenever I called
upon him.

The cords of death entangled me;
the grip of the grave took hold of me; *
I came to grief and sorrow.

Then I called upon the Name of the LORD: *
"O LORD, I pray you, save my life."

And our lectionary skipped the next part, where we hear
his prayers were answered.

Gracious is the Lord and righteous; *
our God is full of compassion.

The Lord watches over the innocent; *
I was brought very low, and he helped me.

Turn again to your rest, O my soul, *
for the Lord has treated you well.

For you have rescued my life from death, *
my eyes from tears, and my feet from stumbling.

I will walk in the presence of the Lord *
in the land of the living.

No wonder the psalm ends with the joyous cry, Hallelujah!

Telling the stories, praying the stories
the stories

of good news.

And now a final story.

I think maybe the BBC
was anticipating today's sermon.
After the program about brains and good news,
was one of stories about life and death.
And one of the stories
was an interview with a farmer.
He said,
"The doctor told me
that I need a double bypass.
And I told him, 'no.'
'No?' he asked incredulously.
'No. I'm eighty five, and I've had a good life. I don't want to die today, but tomorrow...'"
And then he began to sing.

"Abide with me, fast falls the eventide..."

And you know how that hymn continues:

I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;
Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.

Christ is risen! Alleluia!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!