

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Third Sunday of Easter, 18 April 2010. To God be the glory.

Most of you were here for that marvelous Easter morning. We welcomed many visitors, the music was wonderful, and the church was gorgeous. Then last Sunday, what we call Low Sunday, we were filled to the brim again, helped by the families and children of three infants whom we baptized.

But we're definitely post-Easter today. And feeling Easter two weeks hence isn't so easy. This year Easter Monday, literally, was death dealing: the explosion at the Upper Big Branch mine, and the senselessness of those 29 miners' deaths makes it hard to bask in the glow of Easter. And the following week the plane crash, which killed scores of Polish leaders, leaves more than one nation grieving. We're reminded in both tragedies that through technology which brings us 24 hour news, and vivid images of death, that the world gets ever smaller. And that life is uncertain and often too short, so we cannot help but feel connected to the people in West Virginia and to the people of Poland.

Last week I was privileged to be part of a dinner in Cambridge. Our hosts were three siblings, all in their mid to late 50s, whose economic privilege, a legacy from their parents, has called them to philanthropy, and that too, the commitment to sacrificial giving for the common good, is a legacy from their late parents. So every year one of the siblings hosts a dinner, invites a speaker, and what follows is a salon. And I'm guessing that what also follows is a substantive conversation among the trustees of this family's foundation about how and what they'll fund in this next year. I'd say we were 40 people. The speaker, whom I hope to invite to preach some Sunday, is the president of the Union of Concerned Scientists, a collegium who work to address climate change. What struck me by the conversation, by our questions and by the the speaker's responses to us, was the hopefulness which blanketed the usually unhopeful topic of climate change. We can start over. And of course I was reminded yet again how intertwined economic policy is with bad environmental stewardship. The coal lobby, for example, isn't limited to the states like West Virginia and the several others where mining occurs, but includes other states without a single coal mine, who rely on coal for 90% and sometimes nearly 100% for electrical power.

The hopefulness wasn't explicitly religious, but one of the guests, an elderly gentlemen whose passion is education, and whose life's work had been at Philips Exeter and Roxbury Latin, asked about whether the Union of Concerned Scientists had read Father Thomas Berry's works about listening to the earth for answers. And for those of you who don't know Father Berry's incredible contributions to the field of wisdom and problem-solving, let me summarize them, very grossly: humanity can't usually solve its own problems, we need deeper wisdom than our own. At the end of the evening I thanked the distinguished fellow for his question, and queried him about his faith, assuming he was a churchman. He said, "I don't go in for much church, or really any particular religion, except for the resurrection, now that's something for us to pay attention to!"

We did indeed three weeks ago today, pay attention to, come face-to-face with our own story: the story of Jesus' life, death, and that powerful story of resurrection. The Resurrection of Christ is God practicing the impossible and inviting us into the impossible. Good conquers evil, wisdom stupidity, kindness trumps evil, a community of friends besets individualism, forgiveness defeats revenge and life replaces death.

And we read this for ourselves in this story from the Acts of the Apostles, the conversion experience of Saul, whom history now calls St. Paul. Most of us have a conversion journey that's more back-and-forth than once-and-for all. Let's look at it. Paul had everything going for him: he had a secure upbringing, had been given a deep ethical and religious identity, a classical Greek philosophical education, and, by accident of birth in the Roman town of Tarsus, Roman citizenship. Somehow that power and those advantages led Paul to an aggressive certainty, and he signed on as a hired goon for a group of religious leaders who were convinced that followers of Jesus were a threat. Paul's conduct illustrates a point: be careful of what or whom we hate for we might be drawn to the very thing we're against.

We don't know the elements of his conversion, only the outward dramatics. But we know from his writing and his immense missionary achievement that he began to live differently. He set up a connected system of churches that would become preaching and nurturing stations that mark the Christian movement on this planet today. And he developed a way to lead, by his writing in letters, which inspired and informed. He started over.

People sometimes ask, how often do I have to start over? I think the general witness of scripture, the experience of these movements down through time is that we have to be ready "seventy times seven" to start over. We have to be ready to lose life in order to find a larger life.

In fact, I think our meat and drink are the fresh possibilities, rather than the old mistakes of life. It was true for Paul, and it's true for us. Maybe that's the hope I felt at that dinner in Cambridge last week, and maybe that's what the retired teacher meant when he said the resurrection is something to pay attention to.

Those first disciples shared a meal with the risen Jesus, and now we regularly share the Eucharist with him. Thanks to the resurrection, loving God now means feeding and caring for others. We stand in sympathy with the people of West Virginia whose loved ones died, and with the people of Poland, and we claim our commitment to care for the earth. You have your own list as well. Keep at it.

I know it's 2 weeks past, but the power of the resurrection still changes us, converting us to start over, and to serve others in Christ's name.