

**Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
23 March 2008**

Easter Day: Ps 118:1-2, 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; Col 3:1-4; Jn 20:1-18

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We live in a time when everything is “post-something”—and by that I’m not referring to a brand of cereal. For instance, almost every book I read about church life today begins with what can be called “the postmodern narrative.” It goes something like this. In the modern era, which is now in the over, we believed in progress. We believed that life would get better in part because we could apply human intelligence through science, medicine, and technology to solve all our most important problems. The modern era was marked by certainty and confidence. Society—or at least the part of society that we belonged to (ignoring for the moment who is meant by “we”)—was coherent. Everybody knew their place, everybody knew where they belonged. A lot more people were in church—I’ve even heard people say of this era that “everybody” was in church. The world made sense.

All of this came apart in the postmodern era, the one we supposedly live in now. Science and medicine are now understood to be fallible, and in fact all knowledge is seen as largely contingent, largely the expression of a particular point of view with no more validity than another point of view. All kinds of groups have come out from their hiding places to tell us that their sense of reality is at odds with the supposedly dominant consensus view. Groups like ethnic and racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, people living in poverty in this country and elsewhere, have made a claim that their experience of reality differs completely from the reality of those who believe in the confident march of progress. All this flux, all this uncertainty, has made us deeply anxious in the postmodern era because we no longer know where the truth lies.

I think I used to frighten my seminary teachers a bit when I would argue in rather passionate language against at least parts of this narrative of postmodernism. Things may have somehow changed in the sixties and seventies of the last century, but in my understanding the modern era was anything but confident and unified. The only people who could have thought that it was were the people in power, the people calling the shots.

If “everyone” was in church, for instance, then it was also the case that some of those people did not feel as if they were fully part of “everyone”—the women who could not become ordained ministers, or in some churches, even perform any kind of service on the altar; the African Americans and other people of color who were not considered for ministry, just as they were effectively barred from certain professions, certain neighborhoods, and certain schools. And the fact that American religion seems so splintered right now, and that so few people are in the churches that were thriving in the fifties and sixties and so many people seem to be in other churches that we couldn’t imagine back then—all this leads some people to call the present age (you guessed it) post-Christian.

There are other “posts” that people talk about sometimes in relation to postmodernism. They talk about post-feminism, meaning I suppose that the so-called women’s liberation movement of the sixties and seventies won its case and that women are no longer seen in stereotypical ways or disadvantaged in the workplace or society. They talk about being in a post-civil rights era, as if people of color now approach the

starting line in the race of life on a completely equal footing with white folks. And they talk about the post-capitalist era, as if our globalized economy were not simply the same planet-suffocating economic system, capitalism on steroids.

All of these “post-” perspectives, which are apparently settled knowledge in the university world, may in fact have some glints of truth in them, but they worry me both because they sometimes seem to express a sort of nostalgia for the certain, confident modern era, and also because they seem to assume that our primary challenges today are substantially different from what they were then. Did someone get rid of all the nuclear weapons while I wasn’t looking? Have there been no wars and serious threats of war in the “post-war” era that supposedly began in 1945, or the “post-Cold War era” that supposedly started in the 1990s? Has economic inequality disappeared in the post-capitalist globalized economy, or have we simply refined our ability to ignore it, to live with it, to keep those who suffer on the wrong side of the economic divide quiet and powerless?

I’m also uncomfortable with the postmodern narrative because it has become increasingly clear to me that there is one “post-“ period that is more important than all the others. It’s an era that we’ve lived in for over two thousand years, and it’s one we have yet to figure out how to live into successfully and consistently. That is the post-Resurrection era. Even though the Church has been in business all this time, it has not always been about the Resurrection life; it has just as often colluded with the powers of oppression and sin and maintained the violence and brokenness that Jesus Christ, building on the tradition of the prophets, came to heal. We have tamed the message of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection so that we could go on with business as usual, allowing ourselves to be just as brutal and oppressive as the Romans in his lifetime, and the Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Egyptians before that.

So how do we live in the post-Resurrection era? How do we live as a resurrection people? For me the answers lie in the prayer we pray in the sacrament of baptism, right after those being baptized have felt the water:

Heavenly Father, we thank you that by water and the Holy Spirit you have bestowed upon these your servants the forgiveness of sin, and have raised them to the new life of grace. Sustain them, O Lord, in your Holy Spirit. Give them an inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works. Amen.

In the post-Resurrection world, we can be confident because we are sustained by the Holy Spirit, who continues to teach us in this confusing modern or postmodern era the things that Jesus first taught his disciples. One of the things he said to them most often was, “Don’t be afraid.” Whether it’s our own challenges such as the life of this parish church; or local problems that bedevil this city such as gun violence, drugs, poverty, racism, and inequality of educational and economic opportunity; or problems of the world, such as economic exploitation, environmental destruction, sectarian violence, organized brutality by governments against their own people and others, and war among nations or between nations and “non-nation actors.”

We can be confident in facing down these problems because, as a resurrection people, we believe that an all-powerful God working through the Holy Spirit inspires us anew with the words and faith of the prophets, the words and faith of Christ, that speak of a time when we are at last in harmony with creation and at peace with our neighbors.

In the post-Resurrection world we can be persistent. With confidence in the saving grace of God in Christ, we can uncover the courage to will and to persevere. Knowing that God is always and everywhere present, we ought to be able to find the energy to be God's willing hands and heart in the world, hands and heart to bring justice and compassion, mercy and forgiveness—the *shalom* of God spread throughout the world.

In the post-Resurrection world we can feel free to inquire and discern. We need not be afraid to ask questions and dig for deeper answers, deeper truths, and not rest content with the easy answers that usually serve someone's selfish political agenda. To bring justice to a world with so many competing interests will take minds not afraid of complexity, not afraid of ambiguity. In a world where all truth claims are suspect we must use the intellect and insight that God gave us to challenge the spin, the lies, and the self-serving slogans of those who promise us cheap and easy certainty.

And finally, in a post-Resurrection world, we must never forget to rejoice and to wonder. Rejoice in the opportunity and the challenge that God has given us in making us stewards of this planet, and wonder at the sheer magnitude and beauty of it all. We must never forget to link our joy and wonder to thankfulness and humility, and to understand that the gift of this magnificent created world is to be shared justly and generously with everyone in it.

It is a post-Resurrection world out there. Christ is risen from the dead and has given us a new chance at a redeemed life. Let's live that new life as if we mean it, with confidence, persistence, freedom, curiosity, joy, and wonder. Let's live that new life as if we mean it when we say, "This is the LORD'S doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. On this day the LORD has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it." Let's live that new life as if we mean it when we say, "Christ is risen!—Alleluia, alleluia!"