



On Earth as It Is in Heaven

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin
Easter Sunday, March 23, 2008*

There is nothing innately hostile about the way his house looks. It is spare and drab; well kept in an efficient way, but with no sense of aesthetic beauty, nothing to indicate warmth. His house is one of many in that part of town where the soldiers live. Most have been stationed here for many years; some, like the man, grew up here. It is the only home they know, yet they know too that it is not really their home. They are not here to linger or to savor what life has to offer. They are here to do a job, carry out a mission. They are here as an occupying force to keep the peace. The occupation has been long, and there is little to suggest that they will leave anytime soon.

The other soldiers may be content with this arrangement, living indefinitely in a land not their own; forcing people, not their own, to obey laws and order, not their own. This man, however, despite his outward calm, feels disconnected, restless and out of place. The sense of longing for a home that never was and may never be has, over the years, given way to a gnawing, hungry emptiness. He has turned of late to prayer. While he finds some solace therein, it also heightens the poignancy of his unsettled state. To assuage his dis-ease he gives generously to the poor, of whom there are many—nearly the whole lot, for their occupation has been devastating to the local economy.

The soldier's generosity, however, does little to appease the hollow within, for he knows that the people, the one's whose land and whose home this is, they hate him. Not him as an individual; they hate him for the oppression he enforces, for the punishment he gives and the taxes he takes, for what he represents. The people do not know him—the man; they do not even see him. They see his uniform and his face; that is enough, that is all they need to know. Neither cruel nor vindictive himself, the soldier, by necessity, is wary, mistrustful, ever on guard. Neat and polished on the outside, exhausted and alone on the inside; he is a good man in a terrible situation.

In another part of town is a man who cannot be defined by the appearance of his house. For he left his house and even his family some years ago. He is here now for an indefinite period staying with people he does not know particularly well, people who graciously offered their own hospitality. The salty sea air reminds him of home. He feels at home here even amid strangers for these people are his people. They are of the same stock and tribe, share common ancestors, common myths and jokes.

This man left his home unexpectedly when a teacher kindled within him a fire for the possibility of new life, possibilities of a life he wasn't really even seeking that suddenly opened before him in irrepressible ways. There were times, in the beginning, that he wondered if he'd made a dreadful mistake—leaving the familiar behind. But he's an impulsive man, prone to rash decisions. Besides, he left long ago and he's covered a lot of territory since then. Like the soldier, he's on a mission. Unlike the soldier, however, he does not have clear marching orders. The intent is clear; it's just not apparent how to proceed, what to do next. The one he's been following, the teacher who sparked a fire within him, is no longer there to show him the way. So he relies upon his memory of the teacher's lessons, and he trusts his intuition when the spirit seems to move within him.

The man's mission is love. I suppose we'd call him an itinerant preacher and healer, traveling from town to town trying to teach people that God loves them, trying to teach people to love one another. One day, at about noon, the man went up on the roof of the house where he was staying to pray. He was hungry and asked for something to eat. While he waited for the food, he fell into a trance. He saw the skies open and "something like a large sheet coming down, being lowered to the ground by its four corners. In it were all kinds of four-footed creatures and reptiles and birds. Then he heard a voice: "Get up; kill, and eat." But he said, "By no means, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is profane or unclean." (This man's people had strict religious dietary laws). The voice said to him, "What God has made clean, you must not profane." Now this vision happened three times.

Across town, the soldier was also praying. In a vision he saw an angel of the Lord coming to him and addressing him by name: "Cornelius." Cornelius stared in terror. "What is it Lord?" he answered. "Your prayers have ascended to God. Send your servants to Joppa to find a man there named Peter." Cornelius did as he was told and sent his servants.

They came to the house where Peter was staying, just as Peter was puzzling on the rooftop over the meaning of the strange vision he had had.

When official representatives of the occupying forces knock on your door, it is not usually a good sign of things to come. So when the servants of Cornelius came and knocked, those who lived in the house were guarded and fearful. Amid the commotion, a voice came to Peter saying, "three men are searching for you; go with them without hesitating; I have sent them." So Peter went with them to Cornelius' house, in the part of town where the soldiers live. Cornelius had gathered relatives and friends to be there. So far, so good. But now they sat staring coldly at each other, the distance growing wider as they eyed one another at close range.

Unsure what else to do or say, unsure why on earth they had come together, each man described to the other the vision that they had, the voices that they heard. Cornelius concluded: "So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say."

Then Peter began to speak to them, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality"—which is where our Scripture from the Book of Acts began this morning. An epiphany of stunning implications—for Peter and for humankind: no partiality.

It wasn't easy for either one of them. Regardless of their best intentions, you can't simply wipe away a lifetime of learned mistrust, learned fear, deep-seated prejudice and the resulting hatred—that infects us all. "He's one of them," they each privately noted. One of them; the other. Even Peter, a disciple of Jesus, who knew his mission was to love, did not think that meant loving someone like Cornelius, for Cornelius was not just a soldier; he was a foreigner and unclean; not one of God's elect; a gentile in a Jewish world. You can't easily sit down and have a meaningful conversation with someone whose people your people have always despised. There are layers of history and bad blood that need to be worked through. So it is hard work; patient, vulnerable, scary—good work.

"I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Perhaps we see here what Maureen Dowd meant when writing of Mr. Obama's speech on race: "He tried to shine a light on that clannish place where grudges and grievances flourish."

I'm telling you this story with distant long-ago characters that come from Holy Scripture and whose details I've embellished. But this story is one that is crying out to be fulfilled in every city in every land at every hour. The courage and grace shown by Cornelius and Peter is needed today in the cities with occupying forces and warring factions—in Baghdad and Lhasa, Jerusalem and Belfast, in Oaxaca and Nairobi. It is needed in the cities of these United States; wherever there are sharp divisions between people who live together, yet are of different faiths, different races, different ethnic backgrounds. It is needed in every community where we view others with suspicion and mistrust, in which we view those people as guilty of the most heinous of crimes: namely, that of being other, being different.

But why tell this story? Why speak of these things today? On Easter.

Because Easter sets in motion the fulfillment of God's dream for God's people, which is to gather and reconcile all people one to another.

Because the miraculous power of the resurrection is not the promise that at the end of this life on earth we shall find ourselves swept away into heaven; the miraculous power of the resurrection is the promise that this life on earth may be a reflection and manifestation of the life in heaven. That is what Jesus taught us to pray: "your kingdom come, your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

Why tell this particular story? Because this story shows us the way to love one another in simple, concrete terms. This story shows how the first disciples, unsure of what to make of the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ, began to practice resurrection living. We are to practice resurrection in the steps we take. Today the hour is come for each one of us to embrace that "other" who comes from a different tribe, to embrace the one you've been taught, since you were young, to fear, and mistrust, and despise.

I'm not going to challenge us to bridge the yawning divide of racism, to bring about international economic justice, or to mend the fabric of our society torn in oh so many ways. Because important as those goals may be, they're just too big, too grandiose—and thus beyond our modest reach. The risen Christ within us is challenging you and me to do something much, much harder, and closer to home. The risen Christ within us is calling you and me to do what Peter and Cornelius did; to reach out to just one individual whose skin or religion or upbringing or neighborhood differs from your own. Invite that person to break bread and eat with you. Embrace just one, in the name of our risen Lord. And after you embrace one, embrace one more, then one more, just one, and keep on doing it as the Spirit grows and burns like fire within you. You and I shall be changed and so shall the "other." Practice resurrection. Manifest heaven with your embrace. This is Easter: just as our savior taught us to pray: "your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth—as it is in heaven." Alleluia!