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Second Sunday of Easter
16 April 2023

“What Happened!?”

Have you ever had an experience that was overwhelmingly confusing and disorienting? As it unfolded, you were speechless, completely immobilized? Then afterwards, all you could think was “WHAT HAPPENED!?”

During this past Lenten season of soul-searching, I found myself reflecting about the world in which we live, and our role within it. I have asked not just “What Happened?” but “What Next?”

- The world has changed due to a pandemic.
- Friends are not returning to church.
- Mass violence is a commonplace event.
- Politics is increasingly confrontational and nasty.
- In Ukraine, hundreds of thousands are dead and injured.
- Inflation is high and a recession likely.
- Our church is under stress with our rector, bishop and presiding bishop searches.
- The very word we use to identify ourselves, Christian, is a pejorative to many.

In the midst of this chaos, we still must live our lives and deal with our own personal and family challenges. It can seem impossible to stay oriented, to follow the way of Jesus. Where are our guideposts? What are our guideposts? Whether lay person, pastor, theologian, or church leader, we have been praying, talking, and writing about what we are experiencing. The current imperative is, “WHAT NEXT?”

Today I ask you to consider the readings from Acts and the Gospel of John with fresh eyes. Sit back, consider the question, “WHAT HAPPENED?” This is essential in framing our response to the question “WHAT NEXT?”

Today’s readings chronicle events spanning 50 days. They begin with Jesus’ visitation on Easter Sunday with some of his disciples cowering in a poorly lit room for their evening meal. The second event, Jesus’ appearance to Thomas, occurs in the same room a week later. Completing this vignette, we read Peter’s speech to a group of Jews in Jerusalem from throughout the known world. They were attending the Festival of Weeks celebrating the completion of the grain harvest. That speech resulted in nearly 3,000 baptisms.

Between the visitations of Jesus and Peter’s speech, this group of women and men coalesced around the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection. The meaning of his life was made clearer. They not only answered the question “What Happened?” but also began to address the question “What Next?” They began to explore the nature of Beloved Community, God’s vision of heaven on earth, and their role within it.

Last Sunday we heard in the Gospel, of Mary finding the empty tomb and her encounter with the risen Jesus. Today's Gospel narrative begins with Jesus visiting some of his disciples that same evening. They presumably were sitting on the floor of the room as Jesus materialized. There he stood, supporting his own weight; this man who only about 48 hours before had been laid in a tomb, dead. They probably looked up at him in confusion, straining their necks and rubbing their eyes for a clearer view. A gasp, silence, followed by the eruption of pure joy. In that moment, they found assurance, compassion, and strength. Jesus showed them his wounds. Wounds that while real, had been overcome and his body restored.

Their question "What Happened?" was being replaced by "What Next!" Jesus spoke directly to their fears. He offered them his "peace." He offered them "freedom from disturbance, tranquility" as "peace" is defined in the Oxford Dictionary. He invited them into a state of "calmness" that promotes clarity and courage. Jesus then said, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." He bid them to open their hearts and minds to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit that Jesus offered is not just a force for individual comfort and strength. Jesus charged the people in the room to use that power in the world. They were empowered to forgive or retain sins. They were to point out the evil in the world and work to repair the breach.

Thomas was not with his colleagues that evening. When told of Jesus's visitation, he refused to accept it as fact. He too needed to experience what the others had seen, the risen Jesus. Much has been said about "doubting Thomas." We do not know why he did not believe the word of his friends. Could he have been following Jesus' instructions found in Matthew 24? Jesus foretold of the destruction of the temple, the end of the age. He warned them, and us, of false messiahs and the need to discern and experience the truth behind their claims. But Thomas saw the truth of Jesus and believed.

I take great solace in Thomas' experience that day. Jesus did not rebuke Thomas for doubting. He accepted and answered Thomas's need. Jesus came to him and essentially said "see, touch, so you may believe and rejoice."

Thomas' response is all that needed to be said that day or any day, "My Lord and my God!"

Oh, to have been in that room, the "room where it happened" over the next days and weeks. There must have been hours and hours of discussion,
prayer,
tears,
frustration,
anger,
forgiveness,
and healing.

They had to reconcile their new understanding of who Jesus is with the meaning of his life and words. Jesus, this servant-leader, was the savior. What a paradox. He had come to show the way. The words of the Sermon on the Mount or Sermon on the Plain must have been repeated

and with a clear sense of urgency, reconsidered. The actions of Jesus' ministry, the miracles, his compassionate acts as well as his words and actions of condemnation must have been inventoried and critiqued. They were creating community. They were creating community within Judaism.

They had to address the question "What Next?" After all that Jesus had said and done, how were they to follow him? This was their life's work. They coalesced around a singular fact that they had witnessed. Jesus had risen from the dead. Even though this is a simple declarative statement, it is a fact that is contrary to all that they, and we today, think we know of existence and nature. This changed everything. They responded.

Our oldest son Ryan is a geologist who loves rocks. He learns of the nature of his rocks by studying what others have already learned and asking questions. He learns by traveling to mundane and exotic places with his rock hammer, GPS and camera to find and study these rocks. He further explores the nature of these rocks with way cool toys that can identify their characteristics on a molecular level. In community he shares his findings with others and others share with him. It warms my heart to witness his joy and the passion he invests into his life's work. He has sacrificed and must overcome disappointment and failure. Within his field, he is trained and prepared to discern an answer to the question, "What next?"

We are Christians and being so is our life's work. We love Jesus who has shown us the loving way, the nature, of our Creator. God, our Creator, has provided us with amazing tools with which to respond to the questions of the day. We have community. We have the voices of experience from our predecessors from which to draw strength and wisdom. We have the teachings of the risen Jesus who is our mentor. We have each other to support and challenge us. We have the presence of our Creator's spirit within each one of us.

I submit that we as followers of Jesus, the risen Christ, both individually and collectively we must honestly and repeatedly be willing to face these two questions, "What Happened?" and "What Next?" I believe it to be at the heart of Presiding Bishop Michael Curry recurring reminder that we are members of the Episcopal branch of the Jesus Movement. Some two thousand years ago, the early members of the Jesus Movement, as is the case for us today, strived to follow the call, the way, of Jesus. They lived out their lives in a confusing and hostile world. The Jesus Movement started in that small room with presence of the risen Jesus and Holy Spirit. It started with women and men looking for meaning and answers then as we do today. They performed miracles. We shall too.

Amen