

## ***Sharing What's Shown***

Fifth Sunday after Epiphany  
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

Sunday, February 7, 2010  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

1 Corinthians 15: 1–11

Have you ever played that party game called “gossip” or “rumor?” Everyone sits in a circle and the first person whispers something into the ear of the person beside them. They, in turn, whisper what they *thought* they heard to the next person and the “gossip” continues around the circle until it gets back to the person who started the whole thing in the first place. Remember the game now?

And remember the often hilarious results? The first person whispers something like: “The ocean is deep and wide,” and, by the time it gets around the circle, the gossip comes out, “Your ear eats cauliflower!”

Well, the second lesson for today from 1 Corinthians isn't exactly gossip, but it comes pretty close. Even St. Paul seems to admit as much. “For I handed on to you as of first importance,” he writes, “what I in turn had received.” In other words, he is not offering an eyewitness account here; he's simply reporting what he has been told, which is understandable when you realize that Paul wasn't in Jerusalem on that fateful Easter weekend. He didn't see the crucifixion. He played no part in the funeral procession. He never even visited the empty tomb.

Paul, you'll recall, didn't experience any of this firsthand. But he obviously knew people who had, and presumably it's from them that he has gathered his information. The way he heard it, during those forty days following the resurrection, the Risen Christ appeared first to Cephas (that's Peter), then to the other disciples, and not long after that, to over 500 believers at the same time. “If you don't believe me,” he tells the Corinthians, “you can ask them for yourselves.” Our Lord came next to James, and then to the rest of the apostles, and last of all – maybe even least of all, adds Paul – he found me.

I, for one, wish we knew more about these appearances of the Christ. There is just enough here to tantalize. For example, when exactly did Peter meet the Risen Lord? Was it when he returned to the tomb? Or what about this assembly of 500 – when did that occur? None of the Gospels mention such an event. Why aren't the women mentioned by Paul, after all, they were the first to experience the Risen Christ according to the canonical Gospels? And while we're asking questions, which James is this exactly? Was it John's brother, or the so-called “James the younger,” the son of Alphaeus, or Jesus' brother, who was not even a follower during Jesus' life, but became the leader of the Jerusalem church after the resurrection? It would be interesting to learn when and how he became a witness.

Paul doesn't provide us with many details. He simply recites the litany of appearances as if it was all a well-established fact. But if this testimony were presented in a court of law, it would almost certainly be dismissed as hearsay, as

gossip, because apart from his own personal encounter, Paul offers no evidence whatsoever. Indeed, the great irony of this passage is that the lack of proof was probably one of the strongest arguments that Saul the Pharisee, in Paul's earlier life, used against the Christians, back when he was trying to snuff this fledgling movement out of existence. "This talk of resurrection is nonsense," he likely told the congregations, as he moved from synagogue to synagogue. "Where is the evidence? What proof do they have?" He might even have pointed out that all these alleged sightings involved folks who were already believers.

And actually, as far as that goes, Saul would have been correct. Because according to the Gospel accounts, the Resurrected Christ reveals himself only to the faithful. Don't ask me why. If I had been Jesus' campaign manager, I would have run the resurrection a bit differently and scheduled some public appearances. I think the thing to have done was to have the Risen Christ parade up and down the main streets of Jerusalem showing off his scars and smiling to the crowds.

But that's not what the Lord does. He never visits Pilate or Caiaphas or any of the chief priests of the temple. He comes only to those who had been willing to come to him in the first place. Of course, the one notable exception is that he came to Saul. However, even then, it's not the physical evidence that finally persuades Saul; it's the experience. It's almost as if Christ is not interested in *proving* the resurrection as an intellectual proposition. What he desires is a relationship, not just a realization.

Now, here's the interesting thing for us sitting here 20 centuries later, listening to Paul write about the importance of believing the Resurrection. The bottom line is that our Risen Lord manifests himself exclusively to the church, to folks like us. We're the ones who witnessed his life, death, and resurrection, and therefore, we are the ones responsible for declaring that truth to the world. If people don't know what took place on Easter, it's not Pilate's fault. We can't blame the government for not getting out the message. Christ came to us. This is our story to tell.

You see, we stand in the same tradition as Paul and those Corinthian Christians. The Gospel story, this message of a Resurrected Jesus, was passed on to us by those who knew its power to awaken faith and offer hope. Now we have to pass it on. We have the challenge, the mission, the call to share what has been shown to us. As my New Testament Professor, Dr. Paul Achtemeier, used to say to us, "The Gospel is always one generation from extinction. All we have to do is be silent."

Occasionally someone will lament to me that our culture no longer seems to be very church- or Christian-friendly. For example, it used to be that on Sunday mornings pretty much everything else was closed except for the church. I'm just old enough to remember when malls and stores were not open on Sundays, due to the old Pennsylvania Blue Laws. Those days are gone, of course. Most schools have started referring to "Christmas Vacation" as "Winter Break." We no longer have "Christmas Programs", but "Winter Programs." Do I need to even mention the soccer and basketball and baseball games now scheduled to compete for our time on Sunday mornings?

Like many of you, I lament this as well. However, I am not inclined to dash off an angry letter to the school board or the soccer association. And here's why – it's not their responsibility to promote Christianity; it's ours. I've searched the Gospel accounts time and time again, and I can't find a single instance where our Risen and conquering Lord ever appeared to the Little League Baseball Commissioners. Neither did he ever visit the school board or the City Council. He never held a public hearing in the center of any town or county.

We can whine and complain all we want, but that's not going to change the fact that we cannot expect the general population to carry forth the Christian message, unless we share it with them. If the true meaning of Easter is lost and dwindles down to little more than colored eggs and cute bunnies, it's not the school's fault or the government's or society's. If that happens, it will be the church's fault, because the Risen Lord came to us. And if the world is going to believe that he got up from the grave, it will only be because we, who believe it, start declaring it; because we share what we have been shown – that this Resurrection stuff is true and has the power to change lives.

One of my favorite ways to find out what people are thinking about their church is to have them describe it to me as if it were a mode of transportation. I have gotten some interesting answers over these last few weeks as folks have used this exercise to tell me about Trinity. It's been described to me as a large plane full of people on the end of the runway ready for take-off; a train that has a dining car, with various cars added along the route; an old VW bus with 400,000 miles on it and still humming along; a bus that keeps making stops to gather more travelers. Can you see how these descriptions might be informative? They tell me a lot about how folks view their church.

Well, in that same line, let me give you a different metaphor to play with this morning by way of an illustration. Suppose you have friends who have recently purchased a new boat, and they are excitedly telling you about it. They describe how big it is, and how powerful, and how luxurious. "It sounds great," you finally say. "When are you taking it out on the water?"

"Oh, we're not actually going to take this boat out on the water," they reply.

"You're not?"

"No way; it might get damaged. There are all kinds of things that could happen to it out there. It could get scratched; it could get stuck. Our boat is staying on land."

"Are you telling me," you ask bemused, "that you just bought a boat that you're never going to use?"

"But we are going to use it," your friends inform you. "That's the best part. You see, we belong to a club where we all keep our boats in this huge garage. We

never take them out on the water. We go down there once a week and we polish our boats and sit up on the deck and wave at one another. It's a lot of fun. We even tell boat stories, and sing boat songs, and learn all the rules for safe boating."

"But none of you are ever going to take your boats out," you ask incredulously?

"Probably not," your friends say. "Every once in a while, we'll invite somebody who has actually been out on the water to come in and tell us what it's like. They'll talk for a little bit and answer our questions. Sometimes they'll even bring a power point presentation, so that we can see how it would be if we ever went out on the water ourselves. And usually we'll take up a little offering for them."

Hum? I really truly hope that we are not just coming here once a week to tell boat stories, and sing boat songs, and learn about boats from others who actually go out on the water. The reason the Risen Christ has come to us is so that we *will* go out on the water, so that we will go out into the world with this Good News. After all, everyone already knows that Jesus lived. That's a matter of public record. And everyone already knows that Jesus died. That, too, is a matter of public record. But when it comes to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, when it comes to the power of the Resurrection to bring new life and hope and peace to troubled hearts and souls, well, that's not a matter of public record. Of that, *we* are the witnesses.

AMEN.

Copyright © 2010, Glenn E. Ludwig. All rights reserved.