

Sermon for Holy Pascha 2016 (Year C)
Offered by Nathan Ferrell at The Episcopal Church of Saint Mary

Texts: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2,14-24; Luke 24:1-12

Primary Message: God is determined to restore humanity, but we must cooperate

Call to Action: choose to be part of Christ's resurrection movement

Title: Chosen by God as Witnesses

Alleluia! Christ is risen! ***The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.***

Finally, finally, we have come to this day of celebration and joy!
Our many weeks of waiting and works and preparations are over.
NOW is the time simply to celebrate and rejoice.

And what we celebrate today, my dear friends, is the truth of God's amazing, redeeming love.

No matter how difficult your life might be, what we proclaim today is that there is nothing that can ever separate you from the love of God in our risen Lord Jesus Christ.

And life is tough, very tough. If you haven't learned that yet, you will. And when you do, you will know that you cannot rely on your natural strength and abilities alone.

What this day is all about is the revelation that GOD will never cease pursuing you, that God longs to be close to you, that God will go to the utter ends of the earth to bring you home, and that NOTHING – not even death – can stand in God's way.

Recently, I heard the story of a pastor in New York state named John Torres who had accepted the call to serve for a two-month tour as a Chaplain to the McMurdo Research Station on Antarctica.

While he was there, Pastor Torres learned the story of Ernest Shackleton. Maybe some of you know this true story – it's quite amazing.

In 1914, Ernest Shackleton placed an ad in a London newspaper to locate crew members for his now famous Transcontinental Antarctic Expedition.

It was an attempt to travel straight across all of Antarctica – 1800 miles! – from sea to sea in one journey.

Shackleton's ad in a London paper read like this (listen to this!):

“Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honor and recognition in case of success.”

What do you think? Would you go for it? Well, it does seem that there are people in the world who get excited about this kind of challenge.

There were nearly 5000 written responses to this ad!

Eventually, Shackleton gathered his crew of 28 men and they launched his ship from Buenos Aires, Argentina on October 26, 1914, just as Spring was unfolding across the Southern Hemisphere.

However, it did not take very long before this Expedition ran into serious trouble. Shortly after beginning their journey, their ship became trapped in sea ice – pack ice – for 4 months!

So they missed the summer and as winter returned, their ship was ripped to shreds by the force of the ice and it sank in the sea.

It became quite obvious that there was no way for them to succeed in the trans-continental quest, Shackleton dedicated himself to doing all that he possibly could to bring his crew of 28 back safely to port.

Now, remember: they were trapped on the ice near Antarctica!

This was no small task, and it would require every resource that he had.

16 months after his ship was destroyed – now in early 1916 – and long after the world assumed that the crew were all dead, Shackleton and two others appeared at the remote whaling station of Stromness on South Georgia Island.

He had left the rest of his crew on even more remote Elephant Island, and had sailed 800 miles through the roughest seas on planet earth in a tiny lifeboat – all the way to South Georgia Island so that he could get help for his desperate crew.

And once he found help, he turned right around and went back, sailing back – in the winter! - through the deadly Southern Ocean to rescue his crew.

Incredibly, and against all odds, all 28 members of his crew survived.

It's a great story, and I highly recommend that you look it up if you want to hear about all of the details.

But what is most astounding is Shackleton's unshakable resolve to save all of his crew, no matter what the risk or the cost.

They were his responsibility and he would do whatever it took to bring them back safe and sound.

Can you imagine the sense of confidence and hope that this inspired in Shackleton's crew, knowing that their captain, their leader, had this kind of character and resolve and determination?

Well, do you know what is even more astounding?

The character and the resolve and the determination of God!

Shackleton's struggles pale in comparison to what God has done to rescue us.

The Gospel tells us that God left everything behind and entered into the roughest and most dangerous part of the universe: human society!

And for what purpose? To do whatever it took to bring us back safe and sound.

To restore us to our rightful spiritual home.

To bring us home again, safe and whole, in close connection with God and with all around us.

And even more, God faced the reality of death, experienced it in full, and overcame it. THIS is what God has done! Christ took the very worst that humanity has to offer – and we can be pretty awful, in case you didn't know.

Christ took all of that, and all that the forces of evil have to offer, and he overcame them.

So what does it mean that Christ is now raised from the dead and alive today?

It means that nothing in all of creation can hinder God's quest to redeem and restore humanity!

Well, except, there is one thing that stands in the way.

It's this complicated thing which we call "free will." It is our power to make choices.

Did you notice what Peter said about the resurrection? He said this in our first reading:

"God raised Christ on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses."

Now, why was the resurrection only a private affair?

It happened in the dark of night, before dawn. No one was there to see it.

All they knew was that the tomb was empty, and then his friends saw him.

Face to face. Alive! They ate and drank with him, even though he was clearly different now.

But why not show himself to everyone, right? Make a big public speech in the marketplace or in the Temple.

I think I know why. Because God's intention and hope and dream is that ordinary people like you and me will choose to walk in the way of Christ, will choose to work together as the Body of Christ – out of our own free will.

God is supremely courteous and kind and God has NO desire whatsoever to overwhelm us and force us into submission.

We must choose.

My dear friends: on this festival day of celebration, let it be clear in your heart and mind that God will do whatever it takes to redeem humanity, and that God is continuing to build a movement of people who are committed to the way of Christ.

But each of us must choose whether we will join in this healing work of God – or not.

YOU are free to make this choice. You are not a victim of your circumstances. It is your power to choose.

So will you do it? Will you join God in this divine mission to save and redeem and restore humanity? To lead us all back to our true spiritual and eternal home, at peace with God and with one another? If you will give your life to this way of Christ, I promise that you will never be disappointed. Amen.