

Fifth Sunday in Lent, Year C – April 6, 2025
“Resurrection Life—Now, Today”
The Rev. Anne Hartley
ST. PAUL’S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
VERGENNES, VERMONT
Isaiah 43:16-21 | Psalm 126 | Philippians 3:4b-14 | John 12:1-8

Welcome to this Eucharist service on this fifth Sunday in Lent, also called Passion Sunday. As we prepare to enter into the holiest of holy seasons, this service with commentary is intended to help us refocus on an experience is easily taken for granted and to engage more deeply in the mysteries of our faith.

Today, we gather, we as we do every other week, for the Holy Eucharist, the central act of Christian worship for over two thousand years. Christians around the world and down through the ages have gathered and continue to gather for what we are doing today—listening to the scriptures and praying, and coming to the table to be fed by spiritual food and become one with Christ. Here, in these simple acts, we enact the deepest truths of our lives.

We think of Easter as the day we celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus. In fact, every Sunday is a feast of the Resurrection, a celebration of God’s triumph in Christ over death and over all that would tear down and destroy the world. The Eucharist is the great high feast of our faith, because Christ has done for us what none of us could do for ourselves.

Here we give thanks for what he has done and is doing in us. The word Eucharist, which our prayer book uses for this service, is the most ancient name for the sacrament. It is the Greek word that means “thanksgiving.”

The Altar is a focal point of the Eucharist, a place of offering and sacrifice, recalling ancient temple days. Sometimes it’s called the Holy Table, which suggests that we are here for a

meal. The gathering is something like a family dinner. Families gather at the dinner table, to enjoy one another's company and to feel bound together by kinship. St. Paul emphasized repeatedly that those who share in one bread of the Eucharist are one Body. Here we gather to share our lives, to meet Christ in one another—all of us, different as we are, belonging to one another as we belong to Christ. So as with any special meal, we set the table with our finest linens, we give thanks, we eat, and in sharing the meal we become more deeply united. This is the meal of Christ's family.

We celebrate this meal together and so the priest who presides is called the celebrant. Much Christian worship through the years has been passive—choir, scripture readings, Communion, all there for us to receive. This service assumes just the opposite. The Eucharist isn't happening here (pointing to the spot where communion is distributed) or there (the altar). It is what happens in the whole church as each participates in the celebration. Everything in this service says, "Wake up! Open your eyes. Listen to the words, the music, to your own restless heart. God is here with you."

The Eucharist should be celebrated with joy. If there isn't something of delight in all this, we're missing the point. Something overwhelmingly good has been done for us, and a great meal is spread before us. So let's sing out the hymns and say the prayers boldly. Please open your hymnals to hymn 546, *Awake my soul, stretch every nerve*. Let's sing Hymn 546 together.

Processional hymn

We began with an entrance or processional hymn, opening our lives to the One who made us and loves us. "Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve, and press with vigor on..." Fully awake now, we enter into the Liturgy of the Word, where we listen to God through the Word. During

Lent, the celebrant begins: “Bless the Lord who forgives all our sins,” and the people answer, “his mercy endures forever.” Then follows a prayer called the Collect for Purity, which asks God, before whom all hearts are open, to cleanse and lead us into God’s love at this time.

On Easter, we will rejoice again by singing the *Gloria*, but during Lent we say or sing in Greek *Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison* and in English, it is *Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy*. The last prayer before the first reading is the Collect of the Day, printed on the insert. This is a prayer that collects or gathers us together, our thoughts for this day in the church year. Now, let us begin. Please turn to p. 355 and find the greeting for Lent. The third one down on page 355 of the prayer book. Please remain standing for the opening acclamation.

Opening Acclamation, Collect for Purity, Kyrie, Collect of the Day

We next enter the central part of the Liturgy of the Word. The reading of lessons and a psalm has its roots in worship in Jewish synagogues. Jesus himself seems to have arisen occasionally to offer commentary on the first reading from the first five books call the Torah or from one of the books of the Prophets. Our first reading today comes from the book of the Prophet Isaiah and it’s followed by Psalm 126. These were Jewish prayers written generations before Jesus lived. The second reading is always a passage from one of Paul’s letters or epistles.

To prepare to hear the Gospel, we’ll stand up to get the blood flowing and sing Hymn 658, “As longs the deer for cooling streams” Like the deer, we come parched to the cooling streams, seeking God’s refreshing grace. What grace will the God bring us today?

Deacon Lucy will read the Gospel, one of the first four books of the New Testament to give us glimpses into Jesus' life and teachings. Christ comes to us, we believe, as the words of Scripture are read and as they are explored in the sermon.

Usually sermons explore the meaning of a reading for this community, in this place, for this day. We are constantly slipping into thinking that God wants to meet us somewhere else, in some holy place, some special experience: just not in our daily lives. The task of the sermon is to connect the Christ we meet here with the Christ who is meeting us at our breakfast table, in our work places, walking on the green or downtown.

The second half of this instructed service will come during the Easter season and will begin with the Eucharist. I will keep today's sermon short. Now, let's continue with the Liturgy of the Word.

Continue with...First reading, Psalm, Second reading, Sequence Hymn, Gospel, Sermon

Adapted from An Instructed Eucharist by Samuel T. Lloyd III, Past rector of Trinity Church, Boston

Our Epistle reading today is from a letter that Paul wrote while in prison to the churches in Philippi, Greece. From this very remote location, Paul tries to help his people stay focused on first things. As we're approaching Easter, our celebration of the Resurrection, verse 10 caught my attention. Paul wants to **know Christ**... The Greek verb Paul uses here *gnonai γνῶναι* was used by Greek-speaking Jews to imply a more experiential, relational knowing. Paul wants to be in relationship with Christ, to be joined to Christ in this life, and to have the peace of Christ realized in his own life.

Paul wants to know Christ to experience the power of Christ's resurrection. The word for power here, from the Greek verb *dunamai* means force, especially miraculous power. Paul wants to experience the force, the miraculous power of the resurrection. He wants the power of God's singular act of sacrificial love to transform him, and by extension, the Philippians, and all of us.

This understanding is consistent with Paul's branch of Judaism that counted on resurrection for the just and perhaps for all, but he extends that framework so it includes not only a future hope but also a very present reality. Paul wants every moment of his life to be infused by the hope and confidence of the resurrection.

What does this mean for us? As we do good works to bring love, joy, and peace into other's lives, we are transformed. As we stand up in the community to protect our neighbors and to stand with those who are powerless, we are transformed. The hope and confidence that we feel when our community comes together is part of what Paul calls "resurrection life." This new life is

immersed in faith and love, not as Paul writes, on having a “righteousness of our own that comes from the interpretation of the law.” Paul invites us to transform the world into a place of hope, faith, mercy, and love, to experience the resurrection now.

Paul leaves his successes and his failures behind, and calls on us to leave our stuff behind, too—our successes and our losses—so we can identify fully with Christ. He doesn’t want us to be slow and cautious, but to strain forward to what lies ahead. Press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let’s keep our eyes on that prize—a life transformed by love and the peace of Christ here and now—and press on.