

Sermon for Sunday, April 21, 2013 (Easter IV) Revelation 7:9-17, Psalm 23, Acts 9:36-43 "The Beginning is Near"

Last week, when we walked the Monument Avenue 10K, one of the great joys of the walk was the signs we saw along the way. Some were encouraging, like the one that said "Run, random stranger, run." Others were depressingly realistic, like the one about a mile and a half in that read "No, you're not there yet." About 5 miles in, there was one that made Doug excited: "Free beer for quitters." He kept going, though, despite the generous offer.

Signs kept us going on the walk, but they also have other uses. When I first got here, there was no signage saying which door to enter, or which way to the restrooms, or where the parish hall was in relation to the sanctuary. And I mentioned this to the vestry and they said, logically enough, "Why do we need signs? We know where everything is!" Yes, but...what about newcomers? What about guests who come to memorial services or weddings? So we got signs, and I cannot tell you the number of times people said, "thanks for the signs! It makes it easy to figure out where to go."

Signs often are markers of political preferences, or items for sale, or sometimes, religious belief. Who can deny the impact of the signs – horrific though they may be – of the Westboro Baptist Church's picketers at the funerals of American soldiers? And, if you want to have a completely different angle on religion, how about the signs so many churches put up with a clever phrase that's a hint of the sermon to come, or a gentle chastisement? Some of the best I have seen included one that said "Don't make me come down there - signed God" and "You have one new friend request from Jesus – Confirm- Ignore."

And I cannot begin to count the number of cartoons that feature a bearded barefoot man bearing a sandwich board saying "The end is near."

"The end is near." It is shorthand for much of the story that we hear in the Book of Revelation. The variant on the theme is "Jesus is coming!" It's all about the second coming, and how we should always be prepared.

But on Facebook the other day, I saw a different cut on that cartoon image. It's a picture of a young man carrying the requisite sign, but instead of saying "The end is near" his sign says "the beginning is near."

Well, that one sort of makes you sit back on your heels. The beginning is near...what could that mean?

Bear with me a minute while I talk a bit about the reading from Revelation that you just heard. I promise I'll get back to the "beginning is near" sign very soon.

That reading may sound familiar to you if you've attended memorial services here or at just about any church. It tells of those who have passed over to a different time and place, and the wonders that they see. It is a source of great comfort, those final words: "God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

We hear it at memorial services and we think about God's comfort to us, the living, who mourn our loss. But if you listen carefully to the words in the reading, you will discover that those words of comfort are directed toward the ones who "have come out of the great ordeal." Those who are now with God – they have passed over.

So what does that mean to us, who are here? Don't we get any comfort? Of course we do. But we are not there. We are not done with what God has in mind for us. We still have work to do.

The beginning is near...but the beginning of what?

When we hear the story of Peter's first healing in the reading from Acts of the Apostles, we hear the beginning of active ministry of this nascent church, of the first works of this man who struggled so much with embracing his mission, of the first stone placed by the rock upon whom Jesus was building his church. A beginning of what Jesus knew Peter could do, and perhaps Peter was as surprised as the onlookers when he said "Tabitha" and the woman sat up. A beginning, perhaps a little bit tentative, but Peter got it done. He did the work, and in doing that work, he was the beginning of something new. He was the church.

The beginning is near...but what is our beginning?

I'm not sure that I'm the person to answer that question for you. Because, you see, it is your beginning, and our beginning, and the beginning for people who aren't even attending this church yet.

That's the heart of the Easter message. Jesus is resurrected from the dead, and he has given us his charge: go and make disciples. Go and take care of those who need help. Go and be the Body of Christ within these four walls and outside to the four corners of the earth.

And that's the work we enter into at these breakfast gatherings we have had last week and this one. The question that Deacon Harrison has posed is "what kind of church do you want us to be?" And however you answer it, as the Holy Spirit guides you, you are committing to a beginning.

I don't care if you've been a member of this parish since the moment of your birth, and your mother and grandmother before you. I don't care if you just walked through the doors this morning for the first time. We are ALL part of the Body of Christ in this place, and we are all beginning together to figure out what God is gently guiding us toward...and I don't think the endpoint is still waters, to use the language of Psalm 23.

No, the shepherd is nudging us toward new beginnings, not endings. We should not expect rest yet. There will be time enough for that, when we join the great cloud of witnesses at the end so poetically described in Revelation.

But in the meantime, strap on your walking shoes.

The beginning is near. Your beginning. My beginning. Our beginning. Run, random Christian, run!

Amen.