Called To Be Witnesses

Recently, I had a few quiet minutes before a meeting at Christ Church, New Bern and so I took time to quietly explore the grounds around the church. On one of the historic plaques I read that George Whitefield had preached at Christ Church on Easter Day of 1765. That's 250 years ago this Easter! Whitefield, a priest of the Church of England, was a powerful preacher credited with leading a revival in the American colonies known as the “Great Awakening.” With John and Charles Wesley, Whitefield is recognized as one of the founders of Methodism. The next time that I preach at Christ Church I will remember this heritage, and be humbled by the responsibility of proclaiming the gospel in the footsteps of Whitefield!

Everywhere we turn in this diocese, we can find rich reminders of our history, and it could be tempting for us to rest comfortably on this heritage. We remembered at Diocesan Convention, however, that the good news of the gospel calls us to be witnesses to the “new things” that God continues to do in our midst, through his Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. In the Easter morning reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear that “God raised [Jesus] on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.” (Acts 10:40, 41)

As witnesses to the good news that God raised Jesus from the dead, let us not point only to the reports of those whose experience of the risen Christ is recorded in scriptures. As communities that gather to share bread and wine in the belief that Jesus is present with us, even in the elements of our meal, let us also bear witness to our conviction that the risen Christ continues to appear in our midst today and that God continues to do “new things” in our midst.

This week, I witnessed the risen Christ present with members of St. Joseph’s, Fayetteville and others from the community on the morning after a fire damaged their historic church building. They gave thanks for the work of the fire fighters, whose quick response probably saved their church, and they gave thanks that no one had been injured. They also expressed their conviction that God was leading them to join others in becoming more deeply involved in serving the needs of the homeless in their community.

Later, I witnessed the risen Christ in the midst of Palm Sunday worship at St. Peter’s, Washington, as members of their historic congregation worshiped together with members of their newer, Spanish language congregation. The language of our worship alternated between English and Spanish, and there were times when we prayed together in both languages, simultaneously. All but one of those who were confirmed or received was from the Spanish language congregation. The risen Christ calls us beyond the boundaries of our own comfort, to be one body across lines that might otherwise divide us. The people of St. Peter’s offer us a model for how the risen Christ can be experienced in churches across our diocese.

We are called to be witnesses, as we have always been, to the presence of the risen Christ in our midst. May our proclamation be bold this Easter Sunday, in word and music, and may we be witnesses to God’s power to bring new life even in the face of death.

Yours in Christ,

Robert A. Skirling