Sermon on Easter Sunday Year C 2016
(Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43)

There’s a bit of proverbial wisdom that began shortly after the French Revolution that goes something like this: “if you’re not a liberal when you’re 20 you have no heart but if you’re not a conservative by the time you’re 40 you have no head!”

Winston Churchill is supposed to have used it; like most proverbial wisdom it seems to work for some, perhaps some here; not so much for others.

It doesn’t seem to work for me; I’ve been a centrist for as long as I remember; whatever works for the greatest amount of folks over the longest period of time makes sense to me;

That doesn’t make my politics the best or the brightest; it’s just my brand.

But I’m sure you didn’t come here, on this morning, to hear about my politics!

As a set-up, the proverb and my own experience are a good foil to the astounding Reality we celebrate today; for if we define “liberal” not in its political or economic meaning but in its most, well, liberal, sense, then the Resurrection is the most “Liberal” doctrine there is!

For if in *it’s* most liberal sense the word “conservative” is about conserving; about carefully husbanding the great tradition, conserving understandings of God and human society from time immemorial than we have something spectacularly different in the readings before us today.

An unabashed celebration of surprising and gobsmacking newness!

Liberals are famous for disregarding the past; famous for imagining that the present age is superior to what the ancients managed to cobble together; this kind of arrogance and superiority is not the kind of liberalism the Resurrection teaches us.

The Church is only now, or should I say once again, opening up to this way of understanding what we celebrate today, that’s because conservative understandings of God work well when the Church has power as it did from approximately 300 CE to 1900 CE;

For instance, the Nicene Creed, the great ecumenical creed that we’ll say together in a few moments, along with a billion others who will recite it this day, was crafted by bishops who wanted to confirm the unity of a Christian emperor’s domain.

I’ve got a great fondness for the Great Tradition; this service is rife with nods and bows to it! And I believe in it; But I also believe we need a new kind of “conserving,” a new way to hold onto the past while opening up to the new things God wants to do in the world and in the Church!

Here’s the problem: conserved information, as in our creed, doesn’t change us; if it could education would have saved our world 10 times over

We see this played out in our second reading and in our gospel account of the empty tomb.

The gospel account is full of information: the stone is rolled away; two dazzling men are telling the story that Jesus isn’t here, hinting that he is alive, using words like “risen,” whatever that’s supposed to mean!

 Women remember things that Jesus said; words that ring true but…they then pass on the information they have to the eleven who take all this great information and…scoff at it, they consider it an idle tale; they do not believe the women for a moment!

There’s a hint of something, a turning, that happens in the last line, the line about Peter running to the tomb, stooping inside, the linen clothes by themselves, presumably layed out like an empty chrysalis.

He’s amazed, that’s a start! But he doesn’t yet believe; the information that has come his way is impeccable but it does not yet have the power to change him.

What Peter needs, what the women need, what we need, I dare say, is something more than a hint of something; something more than information; we need something more than a conserved knowledge of events whether in the near or the distant past

It’s an irony or at least a paradox but it’s the study of history that leads us to the conclusion that history is not what leads people into the heart of Christian belief symbolized by our Greatest Feast!

What we have in the historical record is quite remarkable; all around the Mediterranean little communities spring up that believe an absolutely astounding fact; that the shamefully killed son of a poor Palestinian carpenter is the rightful Lord/kyrios in the Greek (the same title as Caesar) of the world!

Some of these communities have Jews as part of their membership others are almost entirely Gentile; they know nothing of Israel’s history and have completely different founding myths and ethnic backgrounds and yet they all share this more than surprising counter-intuitive belief!

From the perspective of our information age, the mechanism for their common belief seems to be missing, for the historical records of the events we celebrate today, accounts like the one from Luke have not yet been written!

And so we ask how? And that’s how we’re led into the radical Newness of this event; this something more that changes all who encounter it!

It’s our second reading that this liberal “Now” breaks in: Cornelius is someone who is, maybe surprisingly, a lot like us, a professional, solidly middle class; a good man who gives to charity but he’s not satisfied, he’s got deep questions.

The pedigree I’ve just listed, living the Roman dream, if that’s what we can call it, is not enough! He’s searching for a connection to God; wherever he’s served in Caesar’s armies he’s searched out the local myths and deities, trying to make sense of the world, God; trying to understand himself!

The Jewish information has been particularly compelling, as much of it as he’s been able to glean; he’s even heard amazing information about Jesus and so, through Cornelius’ connections and the Holy Spirit’s directing of Peter we come to the scene in our text.

Peter is beginning to give yet another important, logical, rational demonstration of why Jesus is the Christ when the “something more” the “newness” happens; Jesus himself shows up in the power of the Spirit and Cornelius and his household meet him!

This is what happens all around the Meditarranean, all down through history and still today, in communities great and small; the Risen Christ shows up in people’s immediate Now!

This is the hallmark of Christ’s Resurrection; not a past reality alone, but a powerful presence in our Now, with our questions, our needs and deepest hopes!

I recognize that this can easily be misunderstand; it can be misunderstood as “experientialism,” emotionalism or a focus on the spectacular; it is not of these.

Ironcially, most churches that focus on experience for experience’s sake end up quite conservative which means they’re committed to trying to replicate modes of Christ’s presence that happened in these stories; nothing wrong with that per sae unless it clouds the great liberal truth that God is always doing New things.

There is no formula for Resurrection reality in a parish or in our lives; how the Resurrected Christ made himself know to the women and to Peter, to Cornelius and to us will be unique.

We know this; when the Risen Christ shows up; things change; communities form that are trusting, loving and full of potential; yes they fail, yes they are still subject to terrors and fears and misunderstandings

This is where the Gospels, written after the fact, are still so beneficial for us! This is where the Great Tradition can help guide us.

The new conservatism we need doesn’t try to lead us to faith by the past but, rather, helps guide us in the Newness of the Now of Christ, reinterpreting the past if you will, in light of the New, in light of Christ’s Now!

Here’s the thing; what the Resurrection reveals is that there is no stopping the newness of God’s love for the world!

On December 17th, 1903 at precisely 10:35 a.m. the world of human travel changed fundamentally; something new happened; something the ancients and many moderns never believed possible, a stupid idle tale: The Wright brothers’ Flyer rose from the beach at Kitty Hawk and the doors of a new freedom never thought possible were opened.

When Christ rose from the dead a new door opened for the human race, but this time it was door of Newness itself.

The ancient world was wedded to a strict kind of conservative outlook that privileged fate; our future was written in the stars; you really couldn’t change the way things were meant to turn out.

But the Resurrection of Christ introduced God’s truth; God’s Newness; every moment is a new opportunity; even difficult things have within them a germ, a seed of possibility; the astounding glory of God’s presence allowing us to be new and free in our Now!

The extent of that newness is what we witness to this day! When a loving God enters our brokenness and offers forgiveness we put his Son to death because we felt exposed and shamed; it was our lowest point

The Resurrection is God’s promise that his forgiveness is so creative, so powerfully creation shaping that not even our worst can shut it down; rather New is the Destiny of Humankind; the Destiny of Creation! The Destiny of your life tied to the Risen One’s inexhaustible New and Glorious Life!

In our own lives, wherever there is embarrassment, disappointment, loss, and discouragement we may imagine that mere information will help; it will after the fact; but we need something more.

Today we celebrate that something more, that Someone! I’d better stop before he interrupts me for going on too long! Welcome Lord Christ!