

life at ASCENSION

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The Church of the Ascension, Fifth Avenue at Tenth Street, New York City

A GOD OF SURPRISES

Some years ago, a friend and I were talking about Easter and the Resurrection. My friend wanted to know if there is some common element or quality in Jesus' message or personality after rising from the dead that is different from what he did and taught in his ordinary human life. What is a risen-from-the-dead person like?

We examined several theories. The resurrected Christ was clearly like, but unlike the man, Jesus of Nazareth. He apparently had a physical body – he could talk and eat and be touched. He was a little hard to recognize, though. His message was usually one of peace and of promise. My companion thought that in a way he talked and acted like someone from the future. But the common factor was something simpler than all that. The common thread was the element of surprise.

The women who went to the grave to mourn were surprised at what they found (or didn't find) there. The disciples hiding in their rooms after the crucifixion were more than surprised when suddenly Jesus was present in their midst. Travelers on the road to Emmaus were overtaken by a mysterious stranger who opened their eyes and set fire to their hearts. His closest friends spotted him on the beach in the early morning and shared a Eucharistic breakfast. It seems you never know when this risen-from-the-dead person is going to show up!

Maybe that unpredictability, that quality of surprise, is the deep meaning of Easter. If Jesus has broken the bonds of death and, in the resurrection, moved beyond the limitations of this time and space, then he can be anywhere, anytime. And when he chooses to appear to somebody – like the way he appeared to Paul in his Damascus road vision – it is with an authenticity, a reality, which equals his ordinary human presence as Jesus of Nazareth. Paul certainly thought so. He speaks of meeting Jesus in that experience and of being a true Apostle as if he had been traveling the roads of Judea with the Twelve all along.

Our God is a God of surprises -- and the Risen Lord is God's biggest surprise of all. During the Great Fifty Days of Easter, the Church re-tells all her cherished stories of resurrection appearances, savoring each and every one. But the point of it all is to remind you and me that we should expect to be surprised by resurrection. The Risen Savior is at large in the world. One moment you're all alone searching for guidance or wrestling in prayer and suddenly – he's right there beside you! Whether in happiness or in sorrow, there's no time or place when we might not be "surprised by joy" as C. S. Lewis once described it.

As the springtime deepens and blossoms into summer, may God's presence in this season of new life and rebirth constantly surprise you. Open your senses and your souls to the Risen Christ and feel the joy and laughter of the resurrection. Its power is like a beloved family story, a wonderful old joke that should never fail to get a laugh. Who knows where it all will lead us?

Surprise! Happy Eastertide. Ω

—Andrew Foster, Rector, Church of the Ascension

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Vestry Notes

At its February meeting the Vestry:

-Fr. Andrew reported that a team from Quoirin organ builders came to New York to meet with our architect and engineers.

-Learned from Deacon Anne that a committee has been formed to promote the Carpenter's Kids initiative.

-Authorized a contract with the lighting designer to prepare schematic drawings of the electrical and lighting systems.

-Heard a report on the meeting that was held with Kim Lovejoy of Evergreene Painting Studios, Inc. on their investigation of the condition of the interior surfaces in the church as well as of historic paint and plaster treatments.

-Learned that an acoustician met with the architect and Dr. Keene to determine that proposed changes in the sanctuary would not adversely affect the acoustics.

At its March meeting the Vestry:

-Learned from Fr. Andrew that the very entertaining musical evening with Barbara Rearick and Ray Willingham raised approximately \$750.00.

-Learned from Fr. Andrew that we received a bequest of \$20,000 from the estate of our long time parishioner, Ted Kneisler.

-Learned from Fr. Andrew that he received word that we will be receiving a bequest of \$10,000 from the estate of Claus Hoie. Claus was a former parishioner and was the artist who did the line drawing of our two angels that is frequently used on items like our

Ascension t-shirts.

-Fr. Mark reported that the Food Pantry received a \$6,000 grant from the Food Bank of New York and that there will be a jazz concert fundraiser for the Food Pantry on June 11th.

-Learned from the Buildings and Grounds Co-chair, Dori Dinsmoor, that we will have bids for phase 2 of our brownstone restoration in time for a vote at our April Vestry meeting.

-Learned from Fr. Andrew that Bishop Andrew St. John, Rector of The Church of the Transfiguration, will join us to celebrate Ascension Day on Sunday, May 17th.

-Sibyl Piccone

The Vestry generally meets on the third Wednesday of each month at 7 p.m. in the Parish Hall. Meetings are open to the parish and parishioners are welcome, in advance of the meeting, to request time to address vestry.



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is published bimonthly by the Church of the Ascension. We welcome submissions, reserving the right to edit for style and length, if necessary. The deadline for contributions is the 15th of the month preceding publication.

The Resurrection Windows

Unlike the Matisse Chapel in Vence, France, Ascension did not get specific window designs with the renovation plans of the 1880's. Because the subject matter for all of them was chosen by the donors, who also, presumably, approved the designs, we have a variety of subject matter, and in the case of the Resurrection, three versions of the same event.

These three windows, the Southworth on the south aisle and the Rhinelander and the Grosvenor on the north, actually depict responses to the Resurrection rather than the event itself. Nowhere in them do we see the figure of Christ. "He is not here. He is risen." Therein is their first message. Windows and other church ornaments, remember, were originally didactic, designed to instruct the largely illiterate laity.

But after this basic similarity our three windows differ. The Southworth is the most colorful and most populous of the three. Following Luke's account, the foreground shows Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James at the tomb. There are two male figures, probably disciples, in middle ground. Three angels hover above. The red-clad woman in the foreground clutches her mantle, as if to protect herself. Although the body language of the other two is not perceptible, the tilt of their heads suggests perplexity. The blue-robed man points to a location outside the picture, and the other thoughtfully holds a finger to his cheek. All of the figures have very serious facial expressions, the woman in red looking even a little annoyed. Although the angels know what has happened, the people do not, and they are behaving like human beings.

So are the women in the Rhinelander window. Matthew mentions only two, Mary Magdalene and "the other Mary." From the left foreground they regard the angel standing in the right lancet. The standing woman, in red, shades her eyes from the angel's radiance. The green-clad woman crouches in fear. Angels are scary! Raising his hand in salutation, this one looks stern. Friendly enough but stern. The radiance flowing from him bathes the women's faces in a light that all but obliterates their expressions. The entire window, in fact, is radiant, hardly surprising since it was executed in the Tiffany studio.

Quite different stylistically is the Grosvenor memorial, with its angular-winged angels. Not based directly on Scripture, it shows only them and no humans. Their faces and bodily attitudes are calm and serene, perhaps even inscrutable. The plant life, with the possible exception of the lilies in the lower left corner, is not botanically specific. But the tree behind angels and sepulcher spreads pink blossoms joyously through upper lancets and kite. It calls to mind our Lord's utterance, "My peace I give unto you." Ω

-Liz Hill

Easter Flower Memorials 2009

Please print clearly!

Your name: _____

Name(s) to be remembered: _____



By returning this form to the Parish Office *no later than noon on Monday, April 6*, you will assist the staff in ensuring that the names you have listed are included in the service bulletin on Easter Day, April 12. Your donation to help defray the cost of flowers will also be appreciated. Please make checks payable to the Church of the Ascension.

Mailing Address: Church of the Ascension, 12 West Eleventh Street, New York, New York 10011



Discernment with Jennifer Landis

Over the last six months, you may have noticed in the Vestry Notes updates regarding Jennifer Landis that she has been discerning a call to the ordained priesthood. Jenny and Ascension received the wonderful news in early December that she was admitted to postulancy by Bishop Sisk.

Now you might be wondering, what could all this mean – what did Jenny do to arrive at this place, and what will she be doing before she is ordained? So far, Jenny’s discernment process has consisted of regular meetings with Ascension’s Ordination Discernment Committee, being nominated by Father Andrew and Ascension to the Diocese and an extensive application and screening processes by the diocese along with a series of interviews including a final interview with Bishop Sisk. In the Episcopal Church, those who aspire to be ordained ministers must discern their call to their vocation in community. Jenny says, “Even though this journey has

been tough at times, I feel blessed to have been asked so many helpful and challenging questions by people who really care about guiding people through this process. Once I began to meet with the diocese, I felt carried through by the love and care I had back at home at Ascension.” She says that by far the hardest part of this process will be leaving Ascension this summer, which has been her home away from home since she arrived in NYC in 1995.

Since early December, Jenny has been hard at work applying to seminary, which she will begin in September of 2009. Her seminary education will last three years. During the last couple of weeks, Jenny has received news that she was accepted to Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, General Theological Seminary and Union Theological Seminary. Jenny has chosen to do her studies at Yale, and Bishop Sisk has permitted her to pursue her Master’s of Divinity there beginning this fall. Ω

-Father Mark Hummell

Life at Ascension On-line

In an attempt to become more environmentally friendly and to aid us in good fiscal stewardship, the *Life at Ascension* editorial board would like to know how many parishioners are willing to stop receiving *L@A* in print form, and begin receiving an on-line edition. If you are interested in moving towards an on-line parish newsletter please contact Fr. Mark at frmark@ascensionnyc.org Ω



Ascension Outreach Presents

The Russell Branca Quintet
 Thursday, June 11, 2009 at 7 PM

The Church of the Ascension
 12 West 11th St, NY NY 10011
 212-254-8620

A Fundraiser to Benefit the
 Ascension Outreach
 Food Pantry Program

\$25 Suggested Donation

All donations go directly
 to the purchase of food

Picture, courtesy of Matthew Snow

Pussy Willow Sunday

Centuries ago, in northern and eastern Europe palms for Palm Sunday were difficult to come by and expensive at the same time. This situation led many churches to turn to their local flora for a suitable substitute. As pussy willows are readily available in many cooler climates around the time when Palm Sunday usually falls, they were the ideal choice. Palm Sunday was referred to as Willow Sunday in parts of England and in The Russian Orthodox Church as *Vrebnoe Voskreseniye*, or Willow Sunday. There is even a tradition in the Russian Church of children hitting each other with the willow branches, symbolizing the lashes Jesus received on the way to his crucifixion!

As time went on and our global economy grew, palms became less expensive and much easier to transport to their destination quickly, before they would no longer be fresh for use. So the use of pussy willows began to decline in many churches in favor of the biblically correct palms.

There is now a resurrection of this long standing tradition, due in large part to the environmental movement. Churches are once again choosing to use pussy willows, sometimes in conjunction with palms, as they look for ways to cut down on their carbon footprints as the much desired palms usually need to travel great distances to get to their intended congregations. Other benefits of using willow branches are that since they are grown relatively locally, in comparison to palms, their use supports local businesses and they may be less expensive than palms in some locations.

The resurgence in the use of pussy willow branches for Palm Sunday, whether it is due to liturgical, economic or environmental reasons is a great addition to the spiritual symbols already in use on the day we recall our Lord's triumphant return to Jerusalem. Hopefully this tradition will now continue unabated again for centuries to come. Ω

Wayne Seifried

Rites of Passage

Discovery/Initiation Classes for those seeking Baptism, on Ascension Sunday, draw upon traditions dating back to the beginning of the Third Century. The first relatively full accounts are found principally in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus of Rome and the reports in Tertullian's *Treatise on Baptism*. While Tertullian insists upon preparation by prayer, fasting, and confession of sin, Hippolytus prescribes an orderly discipline for those seeking baptism.

Not everyone who sought baptism was allowed even to set foot on the lengthy path of instruction. If the prospective candidates were deemed suitable, they were admitted to a three-year catechumenate, a period of intensive study. Catechumens were kept aware that they lived in the shadow of a holy reality, which they could approach only with reverence and complete commitment.

Baptisms took place on a Sunday, which was preceded by two days of fasting and an all night vigil. At 'cockcrow,' candidates were stripped of their clothing and led by clergy to the baptismal site where they stood facing the west, the symbol of Satan's realm, the land of darkness farthest away from the east where the sun rose. After renouncing Satan, the candidate was anointed with the 'oil of exorcism,' and was now ready for the triple profession of faith and the triple immersion conducted by the deacon. They were reclothed after application of the 'oil of thanksgiving' by the presbyter and led inside for the laying on of hands by the bishop. **Only then** were they allowed to pray with the congregation and join in the kiss of peace. At the offertory, in addition to the bread and wine, the newly baptized received milk and honey, and water. The sweetened milk signified they were but newly born, and

the water signified an inner baptism.

Even as baptism of infants and children became accepted, Tertullian felt it prudent for people to delay baptism until they were fully and truly prepared to lead the life that it demanded. As stated in *Apostolic Tradition* (23.14), "If there are any who understand the weightiness of baptism, they will be more afraid of attaining than of delaying it." Ω

-Deacon Anne Auchincloss

The Spiritual Development Committee

The mission of the Spiritual Development Committee (SDC) is straightforward: to provide resources and events to deepen a parishioner's understanding and relationship with God. Regular events that we feel have done this are the annual Advent and Lenten Quiet Days, where skilled retreat leaders come to our parish and lead us in reflection and meditation, as well as the Bible Studies and House Eucharists that we help coordinate. We have also brought in speakers on a wide-range of religious topics, from the troubles in the Anglican Communion to discussions on Islam.

A recent and very well-received initiative was a SDC On-line Survey sent via email to all Ascension parishioners. We have had a very enthusiastic response with 46 parishioners having completed the survey as of this writing. The point of the survey was both simple and radical: maybe we should actually ask people what they need from our committee and the best days and times to attend events! Our thanks to all who took the time to complete it and we encourage anyone who might be interested to take the survey, which is still open and available (contact sphagerty@gmail.com for more information). This important feedback will be a great resource in planning future SDC events.

Of course, the easiest thing to forget in all of this is that the Spiritual Development Committee, when it is most mindful of its mission, seeks to work in prayerful partnership with the Holy Spirit. The good work that the committee has done or will continue to do flows directly from that. Ω

~Stephen P. Hagerty, Chair
Spiritual Development Committee

Transition Team 2010

The renovation of the inside of the church dictates that the sanctuary be closed from January, 2010 until late in the year after the installation of the new organ. With that in mind, we have organized a transition team to address how Ascension will operate during that time. The committee is off and running with eight enthusiastic members. Working with the list of questions from the parish meeting on February 22nd, we will be offering solutions from how and where the Sunday/daily services will be held to keeping the parish informed at all times about the progress of the renovation. We will be paying special attention to Holy Week 2010, exploring a possible outside venue for Easter. Finding an architectural photographer to document the renovation progress is also at the top of the list.

With Leo Blackman's help, the transition team would like to schedule a "field trip" into the church during 2010 to take a "look-see" at the progress and to answer any questions you may have at that point and/or create a slide show documenting the renovation to be shown during coffee hour.

We plan to have transparency by using all the tools available to us to keep in touch with the parishioners: website, Merry Noises, and email blasts to name a few. Derek Baker is reworking the website so stay tuned for a new and improved version.

Meetings of the Transition Team will be open to everyone. If you have any ideas, questions, suggestions, seek out one of us or send an email. We want to hear what you have to say. Ω

—*Sirkka Kyle*

The Transition Team

Sirkka Kyle-Vestry Liaison

Derek Baker
Judy Cope
Janet Fisher
GJan Jones

Sara Jones
Lisa Dunn
David Lehmann
Sarah Standing

Theatre Review

It is surprisingly easy to find spiritual and/or religious subjects in the arts world. Recently two plays that closed here in New York City illustrated the ongoing conversation about the subject of fundamentalism in American society.

"This Beautiful City," created by the New York theater troupe the "Civilians," was originally intended as a documentary/theater piece about Christian evangelicals in Colorado Springs. But while the group was interviewing local people for the new piece, the Ted Haggard scandal broke, revealing Haggard's homosexuality and drug abuse, mesmerizing the nation and providing the background for a compassionate look at what the episode meant for his followers. Sexuality, gay marriage, transgender issues, drug use, and the role of religion and government formed a collage of issues that confronted the residents of Colorado Springs. A small cast ably portrayed several characters, and the drama was supported by some catchy music that made for a satisfying evening of theater.

A much lighter take on the subject was the very funny "Savannah Disputation," in which Dana Ivey and Mary Louise Burke played elderly sisters, both devout Catholics, who were visited at home by a missionary whose goal was their conversion and renunciation of Catholicism. The sisters' priest, Father Murphy, was called in to referee the ensuing dispute, and he presided over revelations of ignorance on both sides, finally lecturing the sisters on the authority of the church. If neither play really advanced a point of view, both were very effective in their own ways, one tragic and one comic, and reflected how important religious matters are in American life. Ω

-*Nicholas Saunders*

Holy Week and Easter 2009

April 5—The Sunday of the Passion: Palm Sunday

- 9 a.m. The Holy Eucharist with Blessing and Distribution of Palms
11 a.m. The Holy Eucharist (with Full Choir), with the Liturgy of the Palms, Procession, and the reading of the Passion Gospel

Monday & Tuesday, April 6 & 7—Evening Eucharists for Holy Week

- 6p.m. Penitential Office and the Holy Eucharist

Wednesday, April 8—The Service of Tenebrae

- 6p.m. Prayers, Psalms and Readings in the shadows

April 9—Maundy Thursday

- 6p.m. The Maundy Thursday liturgy (with Full Choir), with the Washing of Feet,
Stripping of the Altar, and Setting of the Altar of Repose.
After the evening service, an all-night Vigil before the Reserved Sacrament will be kept in All Saint's Chapel.

April 10—Good Friday

- 12 noon to 3 p.m. The Three-Hour Liturgy for Good Friday (with Full Choir),
with the reading of the Passion Gospel according to St. John, Solemn Collects, Veneration of the Cross, and Meditations by the Rector.
Worshippers may arrive and leave as their schedules permit.

April 11—Holy Saturday: The Easter Vigil

- 8 p.m. The Great Vigil of Easter
with the Lighting of New Fire, the Paschal Candle & Renewal of Baptismal Vows
This is the culmination of Holy Week, including the celebration of the first Eucharist of the Resurrection.

Sunday, April 12—Easter Day: The Day of Resurrection

- 9 a.m. The Second Eucharist of Easter
11 a.m. Festival Eucharist for Easter Day (with Full Choir, Timpani, and Brass)