

St. Peter's Episcopal Cathedral
Montana

Helena,

The Second Sunday of Easter
8, 2018

John 20:19-31

April

The Very Rev Raymond D. Brown

From Glacier National Park east, historic snow, wind and cold buffeted the Montana plains in late winter. In Blackfeet Country, particularly hard hit, roads were closed, no electricity in many areas, food was limited. Ft Belknap was also affected. On March 1, the Native American Task force of the Diocese meet. On Behalf of the Togendowagen Society sponsored by the Diocese and this Parish, Bill Felton, Blackfeet Elder, and I challenged the Diocese with a \$500.00 gift. To date, including earlier gifts from Bishops Brookhart and Gallagher, \$6,230.00 has been collected and distributed to Blackfeet and Ft Belknap Food banks. This parish, St. Peter's including Togendowagen, contributed \$2,000.00. The Togendowagen Society, Bill and I thank you for your contribution to our brothers and sisters in Indian Country.

My life journey continues. I share part of it with you today. It is and has been intellectually and spiritually stimulating. Why I am with you this Sunday of all Sundays is a mystery. On April 7, 1968, an ecumenical memorial service was held in this church for Martin Luther King. He had been assassinated three days earlier. The church was packed. As the host, I was the preacher. 50 years ago, nearly to the day. A coincidence? I don't think so. Perhaps a challenge from God. The events still resonate in my mind.

It is the Easter Season. Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and the Feast of the Resurrection bring memories of an earlier Easter. It was 1954. I was a Staff Sergeant in the Marine Corps, assigned to VMA-331 aboard the aircraft Carrier Saipan in the Korean theater.

Our tour of duty was nearly over. The truce had been signed, prisoners swapped. In that "Police Action" 36,500 Americans were killed, 92,000 wounded. The 38th Parallel line was established. To this day, the line is heavily protected by North Korea and South Korea with US troops on the southern side. Today, 64 years later, the stakes have been dramatically raised by the threat of mutual nuclear destruction by North Korea and the United States.

Our orders were changed. Our aircraft, Douglas AD-4's were stored in the hanger bay. On the flight deck were 24 Vought gull winged Corsairs. All American identification had been removed. Our destination, the Bay of Tokin, Vietnam. On Easter Sunday, the Corsairs were delivered to the remaining French forces defending the last bastion of French Colonialism in South East Asia at a place called Dien Bien Phu. 5 North Vietnam divisions 50,000 men surrounded them. Scuttlebutt, rumor had it, that we were to provide air cover, a detachment of Marines from the Philippines was to assist in the defense. We understood that President Eisenhower, said "no, we have just finished Korea, we are not going to become involved." Two weeks later Bien Dien Phu fell.

The politics in Vietnam continued with early US involvement and political subterfuge leading to the war which ended with the American Evacuation and the fall of Hanoi on April 30, 1975. 58,000 Americans were killed, 53,000 wounded. Estimates for the dead of the North Vietnam Army were 1.1 million with another million casualties. The estimates of civilian casualties, at least 500,000 to 2 million. The long-term effects of PTSD and physical trauma continue to take their toll. For me Easter has never been the same.

I returned home, attended college, seminary and ordained priest in Diocese of Albany in 1962. Little did I know that world events were dramatically going to affect my life.

In Montana, February 1962, Father Knicely was Vicar of the Church in Whitefish. He and his wife were returning home from Missoula with their new born when both were killed in a blinding snowstorm head on crash on Highway 93. He was replaced later that year by Father Barringer, a priest from Maryland. Father Barringer committed suicide shortly before Christmas.

On the other side of the world, John XXIII, elected Pope in 1958, 3 months into his pontificate called for Vatican II, to begin in 1963 ending in 1965. His calls for ecumenism, for justice and to throw open the windows to let in new winds changed not only Roman Catholicism but Christianity throughout the world.

Bishop Sterling appointed me vicar of Whitefish, Columbia Falls and Eureka. I began my ministry there and in the Dioceses of Montaña in 1963. There were already two recent deaths in the congregation. In November of 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated. Through tragedies, we supported one another. They me, I them. We both grew.

In 1964, I performed marriage for a young couple. Shortly thereafter, he left to attend helicopter flight school for Air America. Air America was the air arm of the CIA. He was sent to Cambodia where he was killed. It became extremely difficult to have his remains returned to Whitefish for burial. It was a secret mission. President Johnson informed the nation that no Americans were involved in South East Asia. We were lied to. Memories of 1954 returned.

The blurry black and white TV images from 1964 of peaceful demonstrators in Selma were engraved in our minds. Fire hoses, police dogs and beatings of non-violent blacks affected all in many ways.

The congregations grew. I was elected Dean of the them Pro-Cathedral in Helena beginning my ministry here in September 1966. The effects of Vatican II, new liturgies and other social changes, Vietnam and Civil Rights were affecting the Episcopal Church. These were tumultuous times.

The events of April 4, 1968 have been recounted in many ways this past week. News, Media, special events. Dr. King's last speech was on April 3 in Memphis, TN. He has been to the Mountain Top. He has seen the promised land. His remarks were prophetic, "*I may not get there with you, but we will get to the promised land.*" The next day, April 4, he was assassinated. His memorial service

was held at the National Cathedral on Sunday, April 7, the same day we and others throughout the land remembered Dr. King.

Presidential Candidate Robert Kennedy was in Indianapolis the night of the Assassination. In a little remembered speech, referencing his brother John's assassination, he spoke.

"We can move in a direction of greater political risk or we can make an effort as Martin Luther King did to understand, to comprehend and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land with an effort to understand, with compassion and love."

With tears in his eyes, he continued, *"What we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the US is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and wisdom and compassion and a feel of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."* His words ring truth today.

2 months later Robert Kennedy was assassinated.

I quote from my sermon of April 7, 1968 the memorial service for Martin Luther King at this Cathedral.

"I remember well putting my children to bed Thursday evening. The boys, 11 and 12; the girls 5 and 7. There were tears in my eyes as I tucked them in and kissed them good-night. I knew how fortunate we both were, for across the country in another home there were children who would never again be kissed good night by their father, a father who would never again have the privilege of holding his children simply because the pigmentations of his skin were darker."

Dr. King's words on the gathering on the Washington Mall, part of his dream, still echoes in my mind. "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judge by the color the skin but the content of their character."

I knew then, as I know now, that until Martin's children were free, until all the children of the native peoples are free, until all people are truly free and accepted by one another as brothers and sisters as the children of God, no one will ever be free."

Martin's dream has lived on in many ways. He invigorated many. Vatican II did likewise.

Locally, in the fall of 1968 the Montana Council of Churches met in Deer Lodge. The theme: Native Americans. From this grew their Indian Task Force which resulted in the Helena and Great Falls Indian Alliances. A new organization, the Montana Council of Churches which included Roman Catholics and Lutherans was created. Bishop Hunthausen, Bishop Gilliam, George Harper and I were much involved. I was the elected first president. The Helena Indian Alliance was organized and held its first meetings with offices at St. Peter's. With Bishop

Hunthausen's help and this parish, the Friendship Center for women suffering from domestic violence opened.

All was not well. One parishioner refused to eat from the plates on which Indians had eaten. A small check was sent to the church from a prominent member of this community with a note it was the last – he was tired of all the niggers and liberals. Fr Hall, Episcopal Priest, vicar of the church in Polson celebrated eucharist here. A woman refused communion from his black hands.

Unrest and division continues in our land and the world. Some would argue that our divisions today are worse than during the Vietnam War. We have come far, but there are many miles to travel before we rest. Christianity must play an important role if it is to survive. Michael Gerson, a prominent evangelical writer, wrote in the recent *Atlantic*, How Evangelicals lost their way, "*Christian life, the intrinsic and equal value of all human lives – has driven centuries of compassion, service and social reform. Religion can be the carrier of conscience. It can motivate sacrifice for the common good, it can reinforce the nobility of political enterprise. It can combat the dehumanization and elevate the goals and ideas of public life.... Christianity is love of neighbor, or it has lost its way.*"

The Gospels for this Most Holy Season reaffirm our mission. On Maundy Thursday, Jesus last words to his disciples were clear.

He washed Peter's feet and by this example, commanded us to "serve one another." He broke bread and blessed the wine and commanded, "Do this in remembrance of me." He commanded them to "love one another as I have loved you."

Today's gospel: "When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.'²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so send I you. The Christ is sending us. We are Christ in the world, all that he has.

It is an important time for this Diocese and this congregation. We are seeking a new bishop for the Diocese and new Dean for St. Peter's. It is a daunting and important task. Rosalyn Carter wrote, "A leader takes people where they want to go. A great leader takes people where they don't necessarily want to go but ought to be."

Remember the Gospel, Remember Christ's commands:

We are to serve one another as he has served us.

We are to break the bread and drink the wine in memory of him.

We are to love one another as he loved us.

May we show forth in our lives what we profess by our faith.

Peace be with you!