

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
4th Sunday of Easter
April 17, 2016
The Rev. Grayce O'Neill Rowe

My husband, Carl, and I moved from Hagerstown, Maryland to Cottonwood in October 2013. Friends were amazed that we actually left the East Coast. I always answered their "Why's" with these words - we visited Sedona and got sucked into a vortex. We both love living in this part of the world and today I am especially excited because it means that we get to journey with you for the next several months. Our life in Maryland was very different from our life in Arizona. Well, now, that is an understatement if I ever heard one. Carl delights in the fact that one item that we did not bring with us was our snow shovel. We no longer own a leaf rake or a lawn mower - hooray for that!! When we lived in Maryland we lived in a city that was about 3 1/2 times larger than Cottonwood. Unlike Cottonwood, and unlike Sedona, Hagerstown was most definitely **not** a tourist destination. It was one of those Northeast cities that seems to be dying. Our beautiful Victorian home wound up being surrounded by a neighborhood that included gun fire many weeks out of the month. We often said, what a week this has been.

I expect that you, too, might be saying what a week this has been for you. Last Sunday you officially said goodbye to your beloved rector, many of you had final meetings with her this past week, and then, as of Friday, Mary spent her last day among you as your rector. It seems like it is only a few hours later and now you are saying hello to me, you are welcoming me into your midst. We begin to say hello, a hello that we all know must lead to yet another goodbye. What a week this has been.

Throughout the world, throughout our country there are goodbyes and hellos happening every day. In some parts of the world these goodbyes take place because of what seems, at times, to be unprecedented violence. I suppose we could be thankful that in most of our country, in our communities, in Sedona, bomb blasts, massive explosions and terrorist manhunts are not so commonplace. When these things happen and when our hearts are heavy with goodbyes it is easy, maybe even tempting to forget that we are still living in the Easter season. It is easy to forget that

every day, Easter season or not, every day is truly an opportunity to celebrate, an invitation to hold on to the basic truth that the resurrection teaches us, that every day is filled with the truth that the darkness never wins, every day is filled with the truth that violence is not the answer and the truth that every goodbye is always followed by a new hello.

When I first looked at today's Gospel I was amazed that here we are at the 4th Sunday of Easter and already we are back to people questioning who, what, questioning whether, or not, Jesus is the Messiah. My thoughts at the very beginning of this week were that it really doesn't take very long for us to begin to question all of this resurrection madness, to question what the resurrection means for us. It doesn't take very long to say, with our heads and hearts filled, perhaps, with sadness, it doesn't take very long to say, "What a week this has been."

In today's Gospel Jesus is talking with the questioning Jews, and if you listened to the words that Deidre just read, then to tell you the truth, Jesus sounds rather dismissive to me. He tells those who are gathered, "You do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice." Sure sounds like Jesus is thumbing his nose at those gathered Jews saying they are not his sheep. I don't know about you but I don't like that very much, that just does not sound like the Jesus that I call my lord and savior, the Jesus that is referred to as the Good Shepard.

So, instead of hearing this Gospel as though Jesus is being dismissive, as though he is being really rude, as though he is thumbing his nose at those who were gathered with him, let me suggest a different way to understand what he was saying.

Instead of a who's in and a who's out, instead of a dismissive, non-inclusive way of hearing these words, what if, instead, what if Jesus was saying that in **order** to hear his words, in **order** to know his comfort, in **order** to live on, even after death, what if he was saying you first have to believe and if you believe, then you will hear his words, you will know his comfort. It does not matter who or where you are, Jew, Gentile, makes no difference. Hearing this Gospel in this way reminds us that Jesus calls each and every one of us, Christian or not. Hearing the Gospel in this way, then we can live in his

comfort, we can believe that every goodbye is always followed by some kind of hello.

Some will ask how do we hear his words, how do we hear his voice so that we no longer live in darkness? Let me share with you a few words from Martin Buber's "Tales of the Hasidim." In these words I believe that we will find our answer to how we can hear Jesus' voice.

"An old rabbi once asked his pupils how they could tell when the night had ended and the day had begun. 'Could it be,' asked one student, 'when you can see an animal in the distance and tell whether it is a sheep or a dog?' 'No,' answered the rabbi. Another asked, 'Is it when you can look at a tree in the distance and tell whether it is a fig tree or a peach tree?' 'No,' answered the rabbi. 'Then when is it?' the pupils demanded. 'You can tell when the night has ended when you can look on the face of any person and see that it is your sister and your brother. Because if you cannot see this, it is still night.'" (Tales of the Hasidim)

We hear the voice of Jesus when we can look on the face of any person, any person, when we can look on the face of any person and see that it is our sister or our brother.

We hear the voice of Jesus when we live through a week like this and know that it is not the end. Even when your heart is broken at your own loss, or at the loss of innocent lives, at the horror and destruction we see in the world. You will hear the voice of Jesus when, even in the midst of all that is painful, you believe that life goes on, that after the darkness of the night the bright light of morning always comes

Jesus, as always, calls us to life in the midst of darkness. Jesus calls us to new life even in the midst of our goodbyes. I have agreed to serve here among you because I believe that you, the people of St. Andrew's, I believe that you are believers. If you truly are, if we truly are, then we will remember that the dawn always comes, we will know deep in our hearts that even when we die, when a loved one dies, or when we say goodbye to a beloved rector, we will remember the resurrection and we will know that life is not over, it may be changed, but it has most certainly not ended.

And so today and every day may the love that we know and hear and see in our Lord Jesus, the love that we know and see on the faces of our brothers and our sisters, no matter where or who they are, may this rich love fill every minute of your days, the days during our journey together and the days to come with a new rector. And on those days when you find yourself saying “What a week this has been,” may you be filled with the love of Jesus and may this rich love fill your lives and may you know peace.