

Easter 4B

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St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

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Many of you will have likely noticed that St. Mark's is currently supporting two people who are thinking and praying about whether they are called to serve the church as priests. When someone begins a process like that, they usually come and talk to me for awhile, and then we put together a group of people to think and pray with them as they figure out whether they're called to this particular and public kind of ministry. It's an intimate and beautiful process, and it's probably one of the things the church does particularly well at the congregational level. The bonds that form in this process are deep and enduring.

I'm still friendly with my sponsoring parish and my sponsoring discernment committee many years after the fact. I never quite had the heart to unsubscribe from their newsletter or their Facebook feed, so I get to stay up to date on all the happenings at the little church that sponsored me. It was a church a lot like St. Mark's, actually. It even looked similar on the inside. St. Christopher's in Oak Park, IL was a good place to be formed for the priesthood, and I still enjoy being a fly on the wall and seeing what they're up to.

Imagine my surprise when they were in the news several times over the last six months. This little parish of about 100 people was on TV and in the papers because they did something extraordinary. In addition to the regular stuff churches do—feeding ministries, supporting a local shelter, beautiful worship, teaching the faith to the children—little St. Christopher's went out in faith in a big way that surprised me.

St. Christopher's story started with a young man named Eduardo. Eduardo was a barber in Guatemala. He was being threatened at his place of business by gang violence, and there was no redress available from his government. He was forced to flee his home, friends, and family to travel the dangerous road that so many central american immigrants travel north through mexico—facing the perils of extortion, starvation, sexual violence, disease, and arrest. Eduardo was fortunate; he made it to the border of the United States and hoped to leave the death and the violence behind. Shortly after he crossed the border into the United States, he was detained by Immigration and Customs Enforcement and sent to an immigration detention center outside of Chicago. While awaiting trial in his cell, he collapsed, and, after a medical examination, it was discovered that he suffered from a rare form of cancer.

Eduardo proceeded to spend the next 11 weeks undergoing treatment in the hospital while two ICE agents sat in his room 24/7. His physician sensed that something was not quite right and called a local immigrants rights' group, who intervened on Eduardo's behalf. The officers were removed, and Eduardo was discharged to await a court date.

Here's where St. Christopher's came in. While the young man was in the hospital, the church met to figure out how they could help. They decided on a radical response. They turned one of their downstairs meeting rooms into an apartment for Eduardo. They offered him protection on their premises until his immigration trial. You see, while ICE can enter any church they want,

they really don't want to have that kind of PR on the news. So St. Christopher's used that leverage to protect Eduardo from deportation until such a time as he could be granted asylum in the United States, learn English, and be feathered into the St. Christopher's community.

Where did this little church get the idea that they could save a life? It seems to me that, even though they are good Episcopalians, they must have been reading their Bible. In the portion of Acts assigned for today, Peter and John are standing trial for healing a man. They had been with Jesus for all of his teachings and had witnessed the death and the resurrection of their friend and master. When Jesus told them to go into the world filled with the power of the resurrection, they had the gall to believe him. And so they went to the poor, the hungry, the sick, and the needy. And they began to heal. They didn't check passports, or creeds, or status. They just served others as they had been served by Jesus.

And some people were annoyed. Namely, the leaders of the temple who were in bed with the Roman authorities. Who were these uncredentialed yokels who were going around and helping those in need? Who were these men who were preaching that God had come to earth to save us? And most scandalously, who were these apostles who were preaching that the cross had power? The powers of the day said to themselves, "Didn't we kill Jesus? Didn't we rid the world of all that nonsense?"

Undeterred, Peter and John preach the resurrection to anyone who will listen, and heal people left and right. They cause quite a stir and land themselves in front of some very angry authorities. And even under pressure, they preach the good news of the power of Jesus, regardless of consequences. Peter and John tell us that we have the power to heal, the power to save, because of what Jesus did that first Easter.

I'm thinking this is the story that little St. Christopher's must have read. They must have looked at this story and thought, "Peter and John followed Jesus and changed the world; we can too." And so they did. They saved the life of Eduardo and let him live in their church.

Fair warning: when Christians act, someone will likely react. You'll notice that Peter and John are on trial. They didn't get a pat on the back and a cupcake for saving a life. They got a subpoena. And St. Christopher's didn't get all praise. They took on some liability. They entered a legal grey area regarding asylum and what churches are allowed to do. Their priest received a lot of flak from certain sections of society who thought that what he did was threatening to the status quo. Resurrection isn't all lillies and sunshine. Act in this world, and the guardians of the status quo will react.

At the end of the day, though, the reactors don't get to determine either who we really are or what we really can do. That is God's purview. We are named and claimed, not by the high priests or the powers of the day, but rather by Jesus who been through it all before us and triumphed. If we have any audacity to act in this world, it is because of Jesus who turned the shackles (and ignominy) of the cross into freedom and power. John and Peter believed and changed the world. St. Christopher's believed that and saved a life. Do we believe? And if so, what is next for little St. Mark's? Amen.