

Discover Christ Alive

By Bishop Paul V. Marshall

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[This is Bishop Paul Marshall's April 2009 column for secular newspapers throughout our 14 counties. It is published by The Morning Call, Allentown, on the first Saturday of every month. It usually appears also in ten additional papers. The combined circulation of papers that publish the column regularly is more than 400,000. More than 130 columns have been published over the past 12 years. If your paper does not publish the column and you would consider bringing it to the attention of the editor, please email Bill Lewellis.]

A Buddhist master was asked to give a retreat for Christians. Accepting the challenge, he spent time with the New Testament. He began by confessing how surprised he was to find out what was in those short documents. If Christ is resurrected, he said, the posture, attitude and every breath of Christians should show that.

It's not new that many people find it difficult or impossible to accept that the crucified Jesus was brought to life, even if they would like to believe. Historical arguments can be mounted to indicate the probability that resurrection took place or not, but those are not conclusive.

Nonetheless, St. Paul threw the gauntlet down in no uncertain way: "If Christ has not been raised," he wrote, "your faith is useless. And of all humans, we believers are the most pitiful." Like our Buddhist master, Paul expressed powerfully the centrality and the power of the resurrection.

Paul had a vision of the risen Christ, and knew people who reported their stories of physical encounter with him in ordinary history. I do not know anyone who has had a vision like St. Paul's, and nobody suggests that Jesus literally walks our earth.

How or why does one believe in the continuing presence and power of a living Jesus Christ? I find historical and theological arguments least helpful in this regard. They are more about belief than faith and relationship. They are pointless if there is no living reality behind them.

Many paths have led people to Christ. I prefer the simple and direct, and I suggest three practical things one can do to discover whether Christ is alive.

First, set aside a period, perhaps 30 days, in which one will behave as though Christ is alive. That behavior begins with prayer. Prayer is conversation. One speaks and one listens. Sharing life, listening for guidance, thoughtfully offering concerns for the world's needs, practicing the presence of God, listening for what guidance may come, what perceptions of people and relationships change.

Next, alter your life to include a few hours of service a week, service to the poor or needy. This needs to be done as quietly and directly as possible, a hands-on experience of serving Christ by serving others, looking for his face in theirs. Volunteering at a hospital or soup kitchen, working in a literacy program or after- school tutoring projects are readily available ways to meet Christ in the face of those in need. Loss of self for others, especially in the middle of a "busy" life, is a way to meet the one who was crucified.

Finally, be where faith already is. The weekly gathering of modern- day disciples for praise, prayer, scripture and sacrament is supplemented by fellowship and the chance to talk with those who are already on the journey. Like its

cousins, Christianity is in both the short and long run about being part of a people, a people with identity and mission.

None of this comes as easy answer or quick fix. To find Christ is to go where he went and be where he is. Those places are not always attractive, but they are full of meaning and often bring joy.

For the overwhelming majority of the world's Christians, Easter is a fifty-day celebration. There is probably no better time to investigate or renew acquaintance with what and whom it celebrates.

The Rt. Rev. Paul V. Marshall is bishop of the Diocese of Bethlehem, the Episcopal Church in 14 counties of eastern and northeastern Pennsylvania. Additional columns and sermons by Bishop Marshall are available at <http://www.diobeth.org>.