

Not What We Expect

Luke 24: 1-35

Resurrection of the Lord/ 8th April 2007/ Sacrament of Holy Communion

Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed!* When these words were first uttered, wonder was mixed with disbelief, and every time they are invoked even in faith, there is still astonishment joined with skepticism. We know the story, some here longer than others. There might be little sense of the surprise felt that first Easter. Perhaps the astonishment is gone for you, maybe there's more skepticism. If we're honest, even the person with the strongest convictions, must admit there's still a part of us that is still asking, after all these years, how can this be? How can this be? The women experience terror in the face of absence and then encounter odd, glowing strangers who announce the unexpected: "He is not here, he is risen." And then, as if this news isn't enough to fray the mind and defy imagination, the once-dead-man-now-alive appears, this dead man walking – not as a ghost, not as a memory, but as a *body* who takes up space and walks with dusty feet and talks and even eats a meal.

We are here this morning in our faith and our doubt because the community of the Risen Lord really believes the "idle tale" told by the women at the tomb. Yet, it's okay to disbelieve this "tale," because many of the disciples did as well. Peter, at least, did something about it, he got up and ran to the empty tomb and went home filled with amazement.

The last time we saw Peter in Luke's gospel he was weeping bitterly. He denied his Lord, not once but three times. You can just imagine what's floating around his head, was he worried what Jesus will say if they meet? Would he come with judgment? A minister

friend was thinking of naming his Easter sermon, “*Oh no, he’s back!*” Peter couldn’t forget what happened on Friday.

We might be focusing on resurrection joy this morning, but we cannot detach this event from what took place on Thursday and Friday, when most of his friends left him and even the crowds rejected him.¹ In John’s gospel, Jesus makes a point of going to Peter and asking him directly, three times, “Do you love me (John 21: 4-19)?” In Luke’s gospel, did you notice there’s no Jesus sighting at the tomb? He first appears along the road to Emmaus to people still reeling from what happened on Friday, bound in grief, who had no idea what was going on and were equally troubled by this “idle tale” of an empty tomb.

The people who hear the angels and meet Jesus are members of the same community that denied, betrayed, and abandoned him. They are all complicit in his death. While the Bible claims we all have the image of God in us, we have done a thorough job of distorting that image beyond all recognition. We warped it so much that we couldn’t see the humanity, let alone the divinity in Jesus. In his death we reject both divinity and God-given humanity. No one is innocent here. We share the same DNA as those who betrayed, denied, and crucified the Lord – we are they and they are us. We can focus on Easter joy all we want, but it rings hollow if we forget how Jesus got into that tomb in the first place and why he was raised.

Why was he raised? It’s not a wish-fulfillment because we’re all afraid to die, as some argue. Neither is it another way of saying in the end everything turns out okay – *alleluia* – so we have something positive to say at funerals. And it has almost nothing to do with the

¹ I am grateful for Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002) who stresses this critical point, one which has guided my thoughts for this sermon.

turning of the seasons, spring bringing new blossoms in plants that weren't really dead all winter. A cold, snowy Easter weekend is a good reminder of this. Neither is this day about replacing Jesus' humiliation with glory, in fact in John's gospel Jesus' glorification is his exaltation on the cross. The gospels never talk about the resurrection as a cancellation of the crucifixion.² Jesus doesn't allow us to blot out what happened on Friday. He doesn't deny reality, he will not let us forget, because he is always committed to the truth.³ This not a story of forgive and forget, but something more profound, not what we expect.

Close to eighty years ago one of the finest books on the nature of Christian forgiveness was written by the theologian, H. R. Mackintosh (1870-1936).⁴ Few read him today; his books are out of print. But his insights are timeless and I believe this work might open up the Easter message for us in a new way. He wrote that "forgiveness is a shattering experience," shattering for the one who forgives as well as for the one who is forgiven.⁵ This is because "forgiveness, unlike a mere *pardon*, seeks to win the offender back into relationship." Such reconciliation is inevitably costly for the offended, as well as for the offender. "Forgiveness, then, involves an acceptance that is costly." But, you see, that's what Jesus does and why Jesus comes back. God could pardon from afar, but God wants more than pardon and we want more than pardon from a distance. *God's desire is to come back, to be close, to win us back into relationship, it's about relationships restored, because seemingly, God desires every one of us as much as we desire God.* Such forgiveness is shattering, because it is

²Williams, 92.

³ This is most evident in John's gospel, see John 1:14, 17; 4:23, 24; 8:32; 8:40; 8:45, 46; 14:6; 14:17; 18:37.

⁴ H(ugh) R(oss) Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, originally published in 1927. Mackintosh was a parish minister in the Church of Scotland and later professor of divinity at New College, University of Edinburgh from 1904-1936.

⁵ H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness* (London: Nisbet & Co, Ltd, 1947), 191.

“a humbling and disturbing gift, and it is not at all surprising if it is declined.” “The offender,” however, “will only be enticed and enabled to accept forgiveness if he experiences the forgiver as a certain kind of person, not a harsh critic or judge of his actions, but someone who has truly drawn alongside him and feels with him.”⁶ So the Offended One shows us who he really is.

The one who walks beside us and sits at table, who breaks bread with us is the very one we betrayed, denied, and crucified. It’s not what we expect to happen. He remembers – in order to forgive. The betrayed sits at table with his betrayers, but reaches out in love with forgiveness. The betrayed *God* sits at table with his betrayers and reaches out in love with forgiveness. “Thus,” we could say, “to welcome or be welcomed by him at a meal on the [far] side of Calvary is the ultimate assurance of mercy and acceptance, of indestructible love.” Indeed, these meals are never innocent of the memory of Gethsemane or Calvary.⁷ Jesus remembers and knows what happened and doesn’t let us forget. But the remembrance does not bring judgment, condemnation, or annihilation, the divine offense is overcome. Forgiveness, Mackintosh insists, is always a creative act, “calling a fresh situation into being,” yielding new life, offering restoration and reunion.⁸

When I think of Jesus appearing to his betrayers and reaching out in love, especially over a meal – for one did not eat with an

⁶ The rest of the quotations in this paragraph come from Paul S. Fiddes’ discussion of Mackintosh’s insights, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 192-197. See also Fiddes’ *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 173ff. The idea of God desiring us as much as we desire God is rarely lifted up in Christian theology because it identifies “need” within God, but it’s there. See Fiddes, 210-215. Cf. Thomas Traherne (1636/7-1674), “He is from all Eternity full of Want: or else He would not be full of Treasure...had there been no Need He would not have created the World...Infinite Wants satisfied Produce infinite Joys.” From Traherne’s *Centuries*.

⁷ Williams, 100.

⁸ Mackintosh, 211.

enemy – this image came to mind this week: it's like a million earthquakes that shatter all our false perceptions of our relationship with God. For Jesus to absorb within himself all the sin and darkness of every human heart, to take it in to himself, not to ignore, not to deny, but to embrace it all and then return to us, returning not evil for evil, but love, returning to us his *forgiving presence* is what it means to believe in the resurrection of the dead. When this knowledge strikes our hearts it's like a Super Nova that explodes in a billion rays of light, releasing, diffusing its redemptive energy through the universe. Everything has changed.

This is the unexpected way of God at work, unexpected because it's too good to be true for our egos, because this is not the way we act when we are betrayed, or when someone seeks to destroy us, it's not what our ego expects, even when it knows it's done wrong, especially toward God. We expect punishment, to be cast off. But that's never creative and it doesn't restore relationships. This is why pardon alone is not enough to heal our souls. We want more than pardon, we *crave* to be welcomed home, we want to be brought close to God and God craves to be close to us, so that not even death can separate us. This is the way of the Risen Lord.

I believe with all my heart that the resurrection demonstrates there is a personal force in the world that is defiant and determined, inexorable, relentless, unyielding in its desire to redeem, save, restore us, a force that contravenes our egos and works under and around all our defenses and all the evil we're capable of inflicting, a force *who* will not rest or stop or stay until every wayward son and daughter is welcomed home for table-fellowship. For Christians, this force is God and has a face and a body – who is Jesus Christ – whose resurrection of that same body testifies that *he will never give up on us*; even death will not leave us orphans (John 14:18). There's nothing in

the entire universe that can separate us from his forgiving presence (Romans 8: 38-39).

So we come to this meal – not a mournful Maundy Thursday commemoration of a last supper – but a *new* meal on a *new* day for *new* people. Not a commemoration of anything, really, but an actual participation in resurrection, sharing a meal with the Risen Lord, who extends table-fellowship to us, where we get to share the grace of his forgiving presence.

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