

Wounds of Love

Preached on The First Sunday after Easter
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
April 11, 2021
Text: 1 John 5: 4-12; John 20: 19-23

Today's Gospel gives us an account of one of the resurrection appearances of Jesus:

"The same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut, where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus, and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you."

St. Luke tells us, in his parallel account, that "they were terrified and affrighted, and supposed that they had seen a ghost."

The Gospel accounts make it very clear that for the followers of Jesus, his resurrection was something quite incredible, and even terrifying. Occupied with mourning his shameful crucifixion, trying to assimilate that tragedy, coming to accept the bitter end of all their cherished hopes, they had no eyes to see his resurrection. Mary Magdalene, at the sepulcher, mistook him for the gardener, until he spoke her name. Two disciples walked and talked with him on the road to Emmaus, and did not recognize him until he blessed the bread for their evening meal. St. Thomas refused to believe until he could actually see and touch the wounds of Christ. In spite of all that Jesus had told them beforehand about his death and resurrection, the fact was simply too astounding to be grasped immediately.

But their incredulity should not surprise us: after all, the resurrection was for them, as indeed it is for us, something completely outside the bounds of our imagination—a reality accessible to faith, certainly, but not something we can really picture in our minds. We can imagine the resuscitation of a dead body—the raising of Lazarus, for instance, or the widow's son at Nain—we can imagine that. But that is not resurrection. Resurrection is not the revivifying of a body, to continue as before. Resurrection means the spiritual transformation of the flesh, to be the clear and translucent expression of the spirit. It means life of an altogether different quality, on an altogether different level, and we can't imagine that. It's outside our experience.

Our ordinary understanding rebels before the thought of resurrection. "How are the dead raised up, and with what body do they come?" St. Paul considers this question in the 15th Chapter of his 1st Letter to the Corinthians. Just consider, he says, the astonishing transformations which go on in God's creation every day. What happens, for instance, when you plant a seed—perhaps a grain of wheat, or of some other grain? The seed decays, but from that seed appears a plant unimaginably different from the tiny seed you planted. "God giveth it a body, as it hath pleased him, and to each seed its own body." "So also", says St. Paul, "is the resurrection of the dead. It is sown in corruption; it is raised in incorruption... it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body".

The world of nature, with its cycles of decay and rebirth, offers many analogies of resurrection, but like all analogies, they only go so far. For they cannot really capture the full reality of resurrection. It is a transformation which is utterly beyond the processes of nature, a reconciliation of flesh and spirit, a redemption of our whole humanity which is final and complete. Our imagination fails us here. We must finally trust that God, who brings all things from nothing in creation, brings life from death, and glory from corruption, can raise us to similar glory. And only the fact of Jesus' Resurrection, and faith in his promises, can establish the ground of this hope in us. As St. John says, in today's Epistle, "He that believeth on the Son of God hath the witness in himself... and this is the witness, that God hath given to us eternal life; and this life is in his son".

We inherit this life by joining ourselves with the Son. It is only through his finished work that we have access to God and can now call him our Father. Just like the apostles, we are to gaze on his wounds, and in them see our redemption. His hands and side, his sacred wounds, are the signs of his own reconciling sacrifice, which overcomes our enmity with God, with one another, and even with ourselves: So Jesus can now say "Peace be unto you".

This peace is rooted in our coming to see what God was willing to do in order to rescue us. When we look upon the wounds of Christ, we see the love of God. The crucifixion of the Son of God is not merely an evil that befell Jesus. It is, of course, the work of human wickedness, and shows how far that wickedness can go. But that is not the deepest truth of it. More profoundly, it is the demonstration of the love of God: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Begotten Son..." He was wounded because he considered us worth the suffering and shame of the Cross. We should embrace this fact and give thanks daily for God's "inestimable love", as the General Thanksgiving of Morning and Evening Prayer puts it.

What we see when we look upon the crucified is God's love, a love which goes even down to death, and will not stop until it harrows hell itself. "He descended into hell" says our Creed. Easter does not contradict Good Friday; rather, Easter is the declaration that the love of God, which we see on Calvary, conquers hell itself; and is eternal life and resurrection.

We are to look upon this love of God as it is lifted up upon the cross. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so much the Son of Man be lifted up: and whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." The Son of Man is lifted up, that we may look upon him and see that God's love for us is so intense and white-hot that he will go through anything to bring us back to himself. We are to look upon that love until it becomes the very substance of our minds and hearts; until it penetrates to every corner of our dark souls, and conquers every hell-bent force within us.

If we do this continually, love will grow in us, and we will participate more fully in the life of the Father through the Son. The Spirit enables us to affirm "that God has given to us eternal life; and this life is in his Son. He that hath the son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life." If Christ lives in us, we should be growing in love. To know the love of God is to overcome the world; "and this is the victory that

overcometh the world, even our faith,” because faith knows the love of God and rests in it.

“As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you.” So says the Risen Lord to his disciples. It is the office of the Church to believe the witness of the Son of God, and to have that witness in itself. That is to say, it is the office of the Church to look upon the love of God and to declare and live that love. That is the very substance of the sacraments we celebrate. In baptism, we celebrate that love which calls us to be the children of God and heirs of life eternal; we celebrate the beginning, the new birth, of the life of this faith. In the Eucharist, we celebrate the sacrifice of Christ, that the very love of God may be our bread and wine, our food and drink. We are assured that we are forgiven, and nourished by a God who desperately wants to feed us, aiding us as we journey deeper into his heart.

But our love has only just begun. It is like a seed, planted deeply in the soil. The new life must break through the rotting husk, and make its way toward the source of warmth and light. Our new birth is a struggle, accompanied by difficulties and failures. Our sins and doubts can oppress and weigh us down. How do we deal with that? How do we combat what seems to have so much power over us? Well, one thing that doesn't work is to wallow in our wretchedness. That is, at best, a useless occupation, and, at worst, a road to hell. It is the wrong focus of attention.

Rather, look upon the love of God, see the hands and side of Christ, and believe that love which forgives your sins and frees you from the dominion of death. Look upon the love of God in Jesus Christ. Perhaps we don't see very clearly. “Now, we see through a glass darkly,” says St. Paul—we see as one might see a rather cloudy image in a mirror. But keep praying that God will aid you in conforming your heart more fully to his perfect love. Spring has begun in us, and our new life will rise to bask in the warmth and light of God as we faithfully walk with him. For the seed of Jesus' resurrection has been sown in our hearts. Let that precious seed be nurtured there, fed by word and sacrament, strengthened by good works, and enlivened by the Spirit.

Let us close with the first line of our sermon hymn, which expresses this all so well.

Come down O Love divine,
Seek thou this soul of mine,
And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
Within my heart appear,
And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing

In the Name...