

Easter II Year C 2016

For weeks we have been on something of a roll reading Luke... this is year C in the lectionary... We have looked at Luke's particular agenda... recognizing that the gospel writers do indeed have particular agendas... sometimes in disagreement with each other... Luke, we have found, you will remember, is interested in the legacy of Jesus... that is, how he fits in to the narrative biblical history of Judaism... Luke is intent on having Jesus as the heir of the prophetic tradition of Israel... that he is of the same 'type' as Moses and Elijah... and about the same ministry... the bringing about of a new Exodus, as it were, preaching about freedom, and justice and dignity... and Luke sees this new Exodus as a reversal of the socio-economic world... a turning upside down of the hierarchy of privilege of his world... that is why his parables are mostly concerned with money... and his obsession with who's in and who's out... Who is included at the banquet that is life in its fullness... this radicalization of the world order for Luke is the work, the vocation of the community of faith... Who he insists must be about the practice of prayer... that is, a way of life predisposed to paying attention, being mindful about their world... thinking critically, seeking the truth of the matter and acting for the truth, discerning and acting for the greater good... Like English Majors! For Luke this manner of life is the life of the Spirit... the animating force of love in the world... Jesus is the archetype for the practice of this community... a practice that is a remaking of Torah... a reinterpretation of God's laws that prescribe our role as humans in the way the created order is intended to be.

The other Synoptic gospels are really variations on Luke's theme in that they too are concerned with the idea of new Exodus... the way forward for a particular people whom God has chosen as light bearers to the world.

But we are not reading in Luke during Easter... The lectionary gurus decided years ago that we would read from John... and John is quite another matter... John was written decades after the Synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke... and John is decidedly less Jewish if you will... John is much more, for a lack of a better word, cosmopolitan. Instead of the categories of Torah, Jewish law, John is rooted in the academy... that is, the philosophical school of the Greeks, the legacy of Plato and Aristotle, which was the mode of intellectual life since the fourth century B.C.E. John uses Greek philosophical categories to explain the nature of Christ... So, you remember the prologue of John... 'In the beginning was the word,

and the word was God. All things came into being through him. What has come into being was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.... And the word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory... glory full of grace and truth.' This gospel is one about seeing.

Some of you will recognize this as Platonic thought... that the forms of heaven manifest in earth... that through being mindful, one may apprehend the nature of God through the outward and visible signs of the things of earth... that what is true on earth corresponds to what is true in heaven... Jesus for the writers and editors of John's gospel is the outward and visible sign, the archetype of God's life in earth... Jesus, the Word, the point of connection between heaven and earth... his life and ministry the manifestation of God among us, which for the Greeks is truth, plain and simple... the truth of who we are... and the truth is the love that we have the capacity to bear... Love become flesh.

So that is some context... and that brings us to our reading today... the so-called story of Doubting Thomas... a famous story to be sure... one that has inspired art over the centuries... I can't read this story without thinking of Caravaggio's depiction of Thomas placing his index finger into the wound in the chest of the risen Christ... Thomas has become something of a hero among progressive Christians... you know... doubting Thomas... the disciple who doubted... the one who allays the guilt of our post-modern agnosticism... but those of you who have read Paul Tillich... I'm thinking of you Sewanee people who had to take Religion 111... you will remember that Tillich argued that doubt was an essential dynamic of faith... that doubt allows us to believe with integrity... that doubt is the mechanism of discovery... and deeper spiritual awareness.... That the religious enterprise is not about certainty, but discovery... American fundamentalism, which is a fairly recent phenomenon, has shattered that reality for many... and that is something that modern Christianity must, for its own sake, overcome.

The early church, at least the communities that produced our canon of scripture, were not fundamentalists... they were quite at home with the ideas of myth, and allegory and symbol.... So, what do we make of this story? This story of Doubting Thomas... the standard bearer of our doubts and uncertainties... the story whose punchline according to many preachers is: blessed are you who don't have to see to believe... blessed are you who have not seen but believe... blessed are you who don't doubt... well, it is obvious by now that I don't think that is what

this story is about..... I think this story is a story of discovery, a story of recognition.

I think this is testimony to the awareness that the spiritual quest is not one of finding certainty... but a quest for discovery... In fact, it is Thomas' doubt that brings him to a religious experience, a visceral recognition of the one raised from the dead... and I suspect that Thomas in this moment of mystical reverie, saw more than just Jesus, that he saw the implications for the community of which he was a part... that is the nature of the mystical experience... a flash of knowledge, of truth, that gives one an insight into the whole of things... a glimpse of how the universe is in truth put together... So what must have Thomas seen?... and of course, Thomas is the literary representation of this community, probably in Antioch in the late first century, or early second century... What must this community have seen? They see the wounds.

It is interesting to me that none of the other gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection mention the wounds... the wounds inflicted by the torture of crucifixion... Mark and Matthew make no mention of the wounds at all... Luke only obliquely refers to them... but John puts them center stage... the wounds are explicitly the lynchpin of this story.... And it is in seeing... touching the wounds that Thomas has his moment of discovery, recognition... ecstasy... What must he have seen? What must have been this community's experience that their scribe called John would have committed the telling of it to paper... words that were canonized into what we call gospel... good news?

Well, what they saw, what they experienced was the truth, in short... and I don't know why it is but the experience of truth always comes amid paradox; amid irony... What they saw was that the risen Christ among them is wounded... that this life that overcomes death is not triumph as the world would see it... but it is life that takes root among the wounded, the marginalized of our world, the ones wounded by poverty, the ones wounded by injustice, the ones wounded by violence, by shame and indignity... these are the wounds carried by the risen Christ.... This community saw themselves amid tragedy and persecution and looming despair, but they recognized that their lives were full of meaning and purpose, and hope, a paradox to be sure.... They saw that in spite of their suffering there was decidedly among them a most improbable joy.

They saw that in reality, a life of love and sacrifice is stronger than death. That a life of love and sacrifice banishes anxiety and fear. For John it is the practice of befriending, giving up one's life for one's friend that bears the reality

of risen life, risen life that is God's life that enfolds our every moment... There is a witness to the truth that empathy.... Creative empathy is at the heart of what it means to be truly human... that to be in solidarity with the wounds, the suffering of our world is to experience the Christ risen among us.

In the institutional church over the centuries we have made an idol of the resurrection... We have imprisoned its reality to the static and worn iconography of our history... We have made it a tale of super-nature, while in truth there is nothing super natural about resurrection. It is the way the universe works... and dear friends of God, the truth is, resurrection is not a once upon a time thing... It is a practice... a present reality, a practice of empathy for our wounded brothers and sisters. It is a practice of placing our hands into the wounds of our world... The raised life of our brother Jesus is found in repairing the breach of the suffering of our neighbor... in the restoration of all that is broken... That to know the suffering of a sister, of a brother is to know healing for our own suffering... This story is about the truth of who we are... who we are made to be.... And the truth will set us free... and that would be quite a discovery; a moment of truth, no less.... And that would be something to see.