

Easter III Year B

The human species has always been in love with the pursuit of knowledge. It is our gift. The ancient Greeks coined a term for it: "Philosophy"... the love of knowledge. The theory among the ancient Greeks was that in the schools of philosophy as one acquired more and more knowledge... as one aspired towards enlightenment... then one drew nearer to God... That pursuit is common to many cultures around the world... God, in whatever culturally depicted form, being the source of all knowledge... Plato famously said that to know oneself is to know God. Confucius said the same, as did the Buddha, as did Lao Tso. I still remember with longing the exhilaration of the liberal academic experience... I remember marveling with classmates late at night how it was that the Treaty of Westphalia shaped for good and ill the modern western world... we marveled how it was that Shakespeare brought the pathos of the Greek tragedy into his own world and expressed it in the finest and most majestic English ever written... How it was that Picasso captured the nihilistic rough edges of the emerging post-modern world in hues of ochre and amber.... How it was that Stravinsky redefined the classical genre of music into the dark and disparate tones of modernity... How was it that an insignificant Canadian scientist named Jonas Salk eradicated a deadly disease from the planet...? I could go on, of course... but suffice it to say we humans want

to know; we want to understand; it is a desire deep in our DNA to be intimately acquainted with knowledge.... But it's more than knowledge that so draws us, so beguiles us. It is mystery. My definition of mystery is: proximity to the truth beyond rational thought.

But this pursuit of knowledge has a dark side, as all blessings have a dark side, and that dark side is that the love of knowledge can become an obsession for certainty. Knowledge is not certainty.... In fact, it is a theory of mine, an irony, that knowledge is best sustained amid ambiguity. Somehow in the evolution of western culture, specifically in the early eighteenth century, the search for knowledge became a quest for certainty. The age was named the Enlightenment, also called the Age of Reason... wherein quantitative reason was extolled; Mathematics and science usurped the authority of the arts and the speculations of philosophy as the chief means of understanding. Quantifying the world, the universe entire seemed closer to the capabilities of the human mind than ever before. The order of the solar system was rearticulated into precision; thousands of species of plants and animals were classified; micro-organisms were discovered; Isaac Newton, often called the father of the Enlightenment, even devised a means to quantify gravity itself. Logic and rationality were the new rubrics of knowledge. Imaginative speculation and mystery had become lessor

gods. This incidentally was also the time when the human species got categorized and ranked according to race... and we of course know where that has led us.

I am proposing that we post-modern people still bear the legacy of worshipping at the temple of certainty.... Perhaps that is why the people of our age are so very anxious; we have given ourselves over to certainty; and certainty, we know, is an illusion... So I say again: knowledge is not the same as certainty... and that brings us to our reading from Luke's Gospel... In one of my New Revised Standard translations, the editor provided a heading to this passage... and the heading read: "Proof of the Resurrection." Of course there is no proof... This gospel was written a generation removed from the time of Jesus' life and ministry... and moreover, the writer of this gospel was not after proof or certainty at all, but knowledge, mystery, beauty... knowledge that resides ironically enough in mystery... Remember, the gospels are not history... that is, they are not a corroborated account of actual events... the gospels are theological rhetoric... that is... they are theological speculations meant to move people to consider deeply their reason for being and to move them into enlightened action... another way to say it is that they are after knowledge borne by mystery, not certainty. So let's look at our text for today.

You remember that Luke is writing his Gospel account using Mark as a guide, Mark being written some ten to fifteen years earlier. There are some passages in Mark that Luke quotes verbatim, and there are some that Luke edits and amends, and then there are some that Luke just leaves out... Mark's gospel as you know ends at the empty tomb; the disciples have fled the scene... only the women remain, and they are told by a young man clothed in white sitting in the tomb that Jesus has been raised, and that he will meet them in Galilee... Luke adds to Mark's gospel two post-resurrection appearances. The first occurs on the day of resurrection on the road to Emmaus to only two disciples... the second occurs somewhere in Jerusalem among the remaining eleven... Both of these appearances have three things in common: the first thing is: at his appearing the disciples don't recognize Jesus... on the road to Emmaus Jesus appears as a stranger... in Jerusalem the disciples think they are seeing a ghost.... How could they not recognize him? The second thing is that in both appearances the disciples finally recognize the risen Christ in the context of a meal; and the third thing is that the disciples are very much aware, or at least the writer is very much aware of Jesus' wounds; in the first case in the breaking of the bread, they would have seen the wounds in his hands; and in the second case, Jesus explicitly shows

them his wounds and invites the disciples to touch them. So this is literature, art.... not history. Knowledge, not certainty... So what knowledge could this be?

Perhaps one reason for the church's gradual decline over the last four centuries, ever since the so-called Age of Reason, is that the church has insisted on the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as being supernatural, a singular miraculous event... the church has made him, indeed, a ghost... Luke is clear that Jesus is flesh and blood... that his reality is not otherworldly, but present in the world of the flesh... and Luke is also saying that our experience of the risen Christ is one, not of supernatural revelation, but a process of recognition... that is a crucial distinction: recognition as opposed to revelation... that to experience the Christ is to recognize something we already know... So what knowledge is at the heart here? What knowledge is here that we have perhaps forgotten? Maybe it is this: That the risen Christ is seen, experienced, recognized in the wounded of our world, in the broken, in the despairing, in the outcast... Perhaps it is as simple and mundane that the risen Christ is served when one who is hungry is welcomed to the dignity of a meal... That is after all the recurring theology that wends its way through the whole of scripture... welcome the stranger; receive the outcast; tend to them; break bread with each other; that is the formula, as it were, for Love... Welcome, tend, feed.....Brothers and sisters resurrection is not a ghostly

abstraction. It is a present reality; and because it is Love itself, Love in the flesh, Love meant for this world, here and now, because it is love itself, it renders powerless the uncontrollable anxiety that plagues a nihilistic and confusing world... Resurrection is in short the practice of Love... and love can't be contained by any measure of certainty, nor can it be contained by the grave itself; Death can't end love; that is something we know... Remember?... Love only knows possibility... joyful possibility amid the random quanta of post-modern existence... Love is the knowledge we have been given. Since the beginning, it was Love that has always made sense of things... Love is why we are here on earth.... that is knowledge worth remembering... I'm certain of it.