

Easter III Year C 2019

Today is the third Sunday of Easter. A lot of clergy have gone on vacation. But these are the high feast days of our faith. So I want to take a serious look at what this time in the liturgical year means for us who are followers of Jesus. I want to give you some thoughts that might assist you in recognizing the truth of the risen Christ as a present reality and not as something that happened a long time ago in a place far away. The lectionary has, for a while now, moved us out of Luke's Gospel and into the Gospel of John, from which we'll be reading throughout the Sundays of Easter all the way through the day of Pentecost.... Fifty days in all, beginning with Easter Day, the day of the Resurrection. For obvious reasons, the first several weeks of Easter we read of the Resurrection appearances of Jesus. There are four resurrection appearances in John, even though the narrator says there are only three. I assume because Mary Magdalene is a woman the appearance to her doesn't count; there are two in Luke, one on the road to Emmaus and the surreal encounter with the stranger who turns out to be Jesus; and the other: Jesus appears in Jerusalem among the disciples. There are two in Matthew, one to the women upon their leaving the empty tomb, and a later appearance on a mountain in Galilee. And of course you remember that there are no resurrection appearances in the original version of Mark. All of these

accounts of the empty tomb are different from each other reflecting the different perspectives of these writers. In fact we now know that there were many other gospels written in the first and second centuries that didn't find authorization from the church fathers. Alas, we only have four gospels that have canonical authority; but it is fair to say that in the early church there were many varying accounts of the resurrection and its meaning. My point is that there is no single account of what happened on that day.... And moreover these resurrection accounts are not based on first-hand experience; they are written a generation or two after the fact; and further, they were never meant to be read as history, factual accounts of what really happened. Instead, all of these accounts, including our own four gospels, are written as theological illustrations, theological speculations, if you will, as to what the mystery of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus means to the movement that follows him. In other words the gospels aren't concerned with the factual details of the Paschal event; they are concerned with what the Paschal event means at the deepest level of human existence. For these writers and editors the Jesus event is a means to understand what God is doing in the world. These accounts are not meant to be testimonies of a supernatural act of God; they are testimonies to the reality that God is among us;

that new life in a broken world is not just possible, but inevitable and irrepressible; that Love is stronger than shame and death itself.

I said last week that the resurrection appearances are stories about recognition... recognition, that is, 'knowing again' who God is, what God is like, and who we are as God's beloved. That is especially true in John, because in all four resurrection appearances Mary Magdalene and the disciples at first don't know who the risen Jesus is. They don't recognize him. Mary presumes at first that Jesus is the gardener. Thomas doesn't see until he places his hand in the wounded body of Jesus. The same is true in Luke. In both resurrection appearances the disciples don't recognize Jesus until they see his wounded hands and feet; or at the sharing of a meal. So why this coy mystery? Why this delayed recognition? That is because, the life of faith for the ancients was no different then as it is for us now. It is a mystery, and at the heart of the mystery, at the close encounter with God, is the reality of resurrection life. Though a mystery to be sure, resurrection life is the truth of who we are, who God is, what life is all about; and it manifests in infinite ways and it always comes to us as if for the first time. The Myth (that is with a capital M) of the resurrection of Christ is the truth recognized: that life will forever reinvent itself; that possibility is always before us; that new life is irrepressible; that Love is stronger than death, and it endures and

it persists. We just have to be watchful for it, and we have to practice it. In short, to know God, to know resurrection life, is to pay attention to and practice resurrection.

So I hope our narrative for today will illustrate what I'm trying to say. But first let's revisit the over-arching theology of John which is quite a different perspective from the other three gospels. John's theology is much more akin to Greek philosophical thought than the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Synoptic meaning 'same lens'... these gospels are more deeply rooted in Jewish thought, based on the practice of Torah. John is of the Greek Academy, and John writes that there is the Christ principle, the Word, the Logos in the Greek.... The Word that is the truth of existence. That the cosmos is held together by a unifying principle embodied in the person of Jesus. The word made flesh is the way John puts it. He likens this principle to light... and he makes the stunning claim that this divine light present from the beginning of space and time is the light of humankind, Jesus the first and consummate example. The remainder of John's Gospel is a 'fleshing' out of this principle... what it looks like among the people of the way, as he puts it. For John this principle comes alive through befriending; and John uses two words for this... philios, the Love of brother or sister; and agape, the Love of God. He uses these terms interchangeably implying

that they are one and the same; that to Love God is the same as Loving one's neighbor. And Love, as John poetically puts it, will lay down its life for the one befriended. It is sacrifice the means of Love, and to be in Love, to abide in it, John's words, is to practice resurrection. Resurrection a process and a practice.

John illustrates a final time his theology in our reading for today. The disciples encounter the risen Jesus on the beach near where they are fishing. They don't recognize him... and then he directs them to cast their nets on the other side of the boat, and they catch a boat-load of fish. The writer says a hundred and fifty three. Then the disciples begin to recognize Jesus. This story also appears in Luke, though not as a resurrection appearance, but as a call to mission. And then Jesus invites them to a meal, and all the disciples begin to see that the strange figure on the beach is Jesus.... And then Jesus addresses Peter three times, and asks Peter if he loves him.... The word for Love here is both philios φιλιός and agape... Love of neighbor, love of God. The two are the same. It is of course no accident that the writer has Jesus asking the question three times of Peter, because just a chapter before Peter denies knowing Jesus three times.... So forgiveness is a part of this experience as well... forgiveness, the restoration of dignity.... And you know that in the Greek, the word resurrection literally means to stand with dignity. So resurrection is about restoration.

And the risen Jesus' last request of his disciples is simple, and it's at the heart of what John sees as the mystery of resurrection. We are to follow in the Way, and that means to feed people, both literally and figuratively, and we are to forgive, because resentment will hold us back from our call to Love. We are here on this earth for just one reason, and that is to take care of God's people, to nurture and sustain them; to enable them to stand... that is the practice of resurrection. Resurrection is first and foremost a gift to the living. It is not a singular event in history, or a free pass to heaven in the next life, but a mystery that informs our daily lives for the purpose of bringing God's bountiful life here on this earth. At the last meal with his friends and disciples Jesus told them that wherever bread and wine are shared; wherever a meal is shared... he is there with them. He wasn't declaring a new sacrament for the church. He was speaking of a deep mystery, a deep truth, that sacrifice, and hospitality, and nurture for the good of the other is what holds the world together... because such things are signs of Love among us. Such things enable Love among us.

Brothers and sisters, recognition of God among us is found in the practice of Love.... Feeding God's people; restoring dignity in the face of shame; bearing each other's burdens.... These are the feast days of such a marvelous truth... Let us with glad and grateful hearts recognize them once again, as if for the first time.

