

Sermon: Year C, II Easter

Texts: Job 42:1-6

Revelation 1:1-19

John 20:19-31

John's account of Jesus' appearing to his disciples after the resurrection is curiously succinct – a detail that deserves our considered attention. Countless retellings of this story over many hundreds of years have dulled its razor-sharp edges into a comfortable old tale, to the point that what's told us is almost no news at all. The report of Jesus' resurrection is quickly diminished into fable or, more widely, it's blithely misconstrued as witness to the immortality that we simply expect awaits all of us. But this event was not so easily retranslated then. Then, for Jesus' disciples and followers, Jesus' death was traumatic and the tales of his rising from the dead were both fantastic and deeply disturbing. And, in truth, if John is to be believed, and if any talk of resurrection is to have any merit whatsoever for us, we must allow the text its own testimony and recognize how utterly strange this story was and remains – a strangeness that stems more from what is not said, from the text's silence, rather than from what is, indeed, told us.

According to John, after Jesus' crucifixion the disciples were in hiding. They had seen the violence wrought by the fickle anger of the crowds. They were confused and, incapable of anything else, they huddled together behind locked doors – when, without introduction or description or fanfare, Jesus then became present to them. John says only that “Jesus came and stood among them.” He appeared, and when he appeared he was already in their midst. How strange. Think for a moment about what's missing here. There was no mysterious knock at the door, no sudden quiet as all the disciples wondered who it could be. No one tried to peer out a window. No one called out nervously, “Who's there?” No one unbolted the lock. No one, opening the door and seeing Jesus, asked casually, “Hey, how are you? How've you been?” There was no small talk, no banter, no startling moment of embarrassed recognition, no awkward attempts by the disciples to catch up on all that had happened after they had run away. Jesus' presence was immediate, and it was immediately intimate.

His first word to his disciples was “Peace,” and with this, he showed them all his wounds. Here, again, John is utterly spare in his report. Jesus did not look about the room, accusing his friends with his eyes. Not a single word of explanation was asked of them. Not a single excuse was offered. No one tried to recount the events in the Garden of Gethsemane to make them understandable. No one tried to justify the disciples' abandonment of their master. The disciples didn't cite their fear or claim that matters simply swept out of control; nor, at the furthest stretch of plausibility, did they suggest that when everything began to collapse they had chosen to trust in the singular providence of God. They said nothing at all about what had happened. And, in precisely the same way, Jesus showed no interest in debating the past. He didn't question the disciples' loyalty. He didn't demand from them their reasons. He didn't bitterly complain or impress on them the magnitude of his suffering. He didn't insist that they admit how culpable they were for his agony; nor did he declare that nothing could be made right until, step by step, for each offense he endured, they recanted and pleaded their complicity. Reconciliation came in the instant of his appearing. It was already, before it could even be broached. It wasn't a possibility waiting to happen. It was the reality that God had established before any wrong ever occurred, and therefore it needed no preamble, and it depended upon no conditions.

The moment of encounter between Jesus and his disciples was profoundly simple: against all the complexity and intrigue of our evils, with complete disinterest in our convoluted intentions, plans, and desires, Jesus proclaimed one judgment, which is the freedom of total forgiveness that waits upon absolutely nothing.

We should note: the disciples physically traced Jesus' wounds only after he had first forgiven them. His injuries were, thus, exclusively the measure of his love for them. They showed the exquisite reach of his grace and mercy. Jesus didn't show them in order to impress upon his disciples the magnitude of their guilt, for which, then, they had to make amends. Touching his wounds was not indictment against them. This tangible revelation was meant solely for Jesus to make powerfully real the hope and salvation they could find in God. By this act of intense proximity and relationship, Jesus so quietly announced what resurrection has opened to us.

It's a very timely story. This week there was much public discussion about insult and offence, justified consequences and rightful condemnation, and the place of apology and forgiveness in community life. All the talk shed very little light – in part because what we really want is not the radical freedom of forgiveness but a comprehensive solution instead. In direct opposition to John's Gospel story, the wounds we suffer tend to create huge waves of debate and conversation without end. Over years of struggle we have generated myriad terms by which we try to determine right and wrong and establish a common understanding, with the hope that with enough effort and enough information, enough explanation, and enough empathy, we will be able to achieve peace by significantly curtailing the wounds we inflict. Thus, according to the systems we have built and come to trust, insult must be balanced by apology. Offence must be soothed by redress. Harmful actions demand excuse, apart from which they should be met with punishment. Standards must be set. Policies should be written and enforced. Education and training should be funded and required. Communication across differences must be nurtured and ceaselessly practiced. We must all work to create a reasonable society, well defined, well maintained, clearly managed so that, everyone living in synch, we minimize the possibility of being hurt or maimed by one another.

This is an inevitable task. It's also bottomless. We have never gained sight of such an understanding, not even from a far distance. We have no idea what it would entail or look like. In spite of all our institutions and advocacy groups and think tanks and foundations, in spite of all the dialogue we keep up, no matter how many laws are passed, no matter how much effort and energy is spent seeking social equilibrium, it eludes us, and dramatically so. All our breath does not succeed in establishing peace – only gestures here and there, amid the clamor of competing claims.

Saint Paul famously noted that even if we speak with the tongues of men and of angels but do not have love, our talk is mere noise. If we understand all mysteries and all knowledge but do not have love, we are nothing. For all the indignation and consternation voiced this week, the term often lost in the fray has been the most crucial one: love, which is most difficult. The term just as often avoided, except perhaps, admirably, by those closest to the injury, has been love's amazing freedom, which is unhindered forgiveness – forgiveness offered not as a consequence after apology or recompense or penalty, but, in the Gospel sense, as sheer gift, given already, as that which simply appears, where wounds are shown not to exact appropriate punishment but to bear witness to the unfathomable generosity of love that has no reason at all nor any justification.

Such forgiveness is profoundly strange. In many persons' minds it would be inexcusable, an awful failure of justice. But forgiveness, when true, is never the culmination of negotiation or mutually agreeable settlement. It isn't making peace. It's breathing it, as if already it were so.

Imagine if we could give witness to this vast reversal, that injury, instead of sparking cries for recompense, became the very sign of love's triumph, every wound being, first and always and only, the measure of the generosity of our forgiveness and a marker of the depth and

sturdiness of peace. Such freedom isn't ours to claim by ourselves; but it has been given us by God in Jesus. This is what his resurrection has achieved. And when we choose to live the within the strangeness of the moment shared by Jesus and his disciples, when we step into the very reversal enacted then, then in our own time and in our own lives we show already what resurrection from the dead means and promises – not as a fable, not as an assumption, but as the passion of God indwelling in us.

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