

Sermon: Year A, II Easter

Texts: Acts 2:14a, 22-32

I Peter 1:3-9

John 20:19-31

If you read the opening chapters of the book of Genesis closely, you might notice that there is included there no record of any conversation between God and Adam and Eve. It's a curious omission. Adam, it is reported, named all the animals. On seeing Eve, he made a deep and heartfelt exclamation, giving her both his own name and her own identity, calling her woman. God informed Adam and Eve of all the garden's delights and issued only one commandment – that they not eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They all coexisted, beautifully, in evident harmony and communion. There is talk, but there is no discussion, no playful exchange of ideas, nor any solemn dialogue about serious matters. Evidently, the context didn't require this. They lived in such natural intimacy that their togetherness didn't depend on nurturing good communications skills and the endless exercise of putting words to thoughts and feelings in order to achieve, however tenuously, moments of mutual understanding.

The first conversation recorded in the Bible is that between Eve and the serpent, when temptation raised its ugly head and, with our disobedience, the world plummeted into the morass of disagreement, argument, division, and, ultimately, the supreme fracture of hatred. With this event, language exploded, and no amount of talk ever since has been able to heal that original rift. To this day, still, we negotiate, we plea and bargain, we try to explain, we rationalize. We draw up contracts and covenants that, even for the simplest of transactions, extend for multiple pages in very fine print. And as soon as something is written and signed, its loopholes become apparent and require, then, further amendment. All this incredible effort is necessary and, often, useful. But at the very same time, it is always insufficient and will never succeed in restoring the communion we once enjoyed – for conversation itself is the very mark of our alienation from one another and from God. This insightful reading of Genesis was recently made by Paul Kahn, a professor at Yale Law School. Leave it to a lawyer to comment so astutely on the inevitable failure of words.

Yet this insight is extraordinarily helpful for us, if we are to understand what John has written about Jesus' resurrection and what that means for us, not only with regard to our own dying, but, just as significantly, to the way we may live in the time we are given. Easter is God's defeat of death, but with this, it is also God's overturning of our original fall into sin. And thus, just as dramatically, and more concretely, it has changed everything about our world now – a point which we fail to appreciate when we make Easter merely a holiday and one day later carry on in the same old ways with the same old habits, making the same old mistakes and suffering the same habitual failures. The Gospel read this morning, however, reveals the moral dimension of the resurrection, how it opens the door to a strikingly different way of being together and of realizing true communion – repairing the very breach that removed us from the garden.

According to John, after Jesus' crucifixion the disciples were in hiding. They had seen the violence wrought by the anger of the crowds. They were confused and, incapable of anything else, they huddled together behind locked doors – when, without introduction or announcement, Jesus 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 pensively, "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. 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. No conversation was needed. None was offered. 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, in endless sessions of therapeutic talk. 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.

This 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 take note: the disciples physically traced Jesus' wounds only after he had first forgiven them. His injuries were, thus, exclusively the physical measure of his love for them. They showed the reach of his grace and mercy. Jesus didn't show them his hands and feet in order to impress upon his disciples the magnitude of their guilt, for which, then, they had to make amends. This tangible revelation was meant solely for Jesus to make powerfully real the salvation they could find in God. He didn't make peace with his disciples. Very importantly, he breathed it, as if already it were so.

Imagine if we, too, could give witness to this vast reversal, such that injury, instead of sparking our cries for retribution, 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 this has been given us by God in Jesus. This is what his resurrection has achieved. And when we choose to live within the strangeness of the moment shared by Jesus and his disciples, when we step into the very reversal enacted then in that locked room, then in our own time and in our own lives we may show already what resurrection from the dead means and promises – not as a fable, not as a distant hope, but as the passion of God dwelling in us. Jesus, the supreme victim, did not seek justice by

means of condemnation, by demanding that all those who were complicit in his suffering should, after proper deliberation, be made to pay an agreed recompense. What he did, for his disciples and, explicitly for Thomas, was his undoing of the very death and division that made them fearful and ashamed – an undoing he accomplished by his embrace alone.

According to our lights, such actions are irrational. In many cases, they would be considered inexcusable or even impossible. Sometimes forgiveness seems utterly offensive. And no amount of talk will change this or make it more seemly. But that's exactly the point. Sometimes, beyond all rationale, we are called to make Christ present, to make him appear, by initiating something sacred, interjecting Easter into the ordinary muddles of our lives. Wounded, scarred, we too can choose to simply breathe peace and put between ourselves the very reconciliation that God has already established, quite apart from all that we might otherwise want to say about it. Being Christian means having faith enough to dare to do this.

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