

Sermon: Year B, III Easter

Texts: Acts 3:12-19

I John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

At the beginning of his Gospel, you may remember, Luke wrote these remarkable words: “And the angel said to them, ‘Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.’”

Few words ever written across all the ages have been as celebrated as these. Still, centuries later, once a year, people leave their homes late in the evening, often in the cold of the night, just to be enthralled once more by this text. You don’t have to identify yourself as a Christian to find it compelling. You don’t have to believe much of what surrounds it, either before or after. It’s able to stand alone and in so short a space mesmerize us – no matter what’s happening in our lives or what struggles challenge our world. We stop and listen and marvel and, as Mary did, experiencing the amazing depth of this birth, we ponder too: how strange and intimate and wonderful life can be. With such ease, Luke’s words allow us to feel as if we can nearly literally touch this mystery. They pull us so close to the heart of our own being, and in the very same moment, they announce that here, in flesh and blood, God is present with us too. And thus, if even for a fleeting time, the whole creation, and we within it, is softened, illumined, and set at peace.

Now, a few months later, we have reached the end of Luke’s story. The text, read this morning, isn’t as well known, and we haven’t surrounded it with the same richness of ritual. But it isn’t for lack of eloquence on Luke’s part. His words at Easter are just as beautiful in their simple confidence as they were at Christmas – if only we have ears to hear it.

Luke presents Jesus’ resurrection with much more tenderness and much less bombast than we’re used to. It isn’t so much the defeat of death that he notes; it’s rather the coming again of God to us, to be with us. These are his words: “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see.” It’s a moment that fairly mirrors Mary, holding her child, pondering God’s love in such human form.

Jesus says nothing about his dying. He shows no interest in that fact because it’s completely past and done. And it has been overwhelmed. Death has no relevance. What he speaks of is his presence to his disciples, his wish to be embraced by them, and in this simple reconciliation to set them at peace. For this, he said, is what endures by the power of God, this being with one another, no matter what, without any need for excuses, without any demand for explanations.

And in one deft phrase, then, Luke redefines our place in life. He wrote that the disciples “disbelieved for joy and wondered.” A weak rendering of this line might suggest that the disciples couldn’t quite trust that Jesus was alive. Death, they supposed, is stronger than even God, and, thus, they were stymied by Jesus’ appearing: how could this be? It’s the same response we often have as well. Brute fact is hard to debate. Dying surely seems inevitable. Resurrection seems incongruous. Doubts arise. How can this be?

But maybe we’re looking in the wrong direction and at the wrong object. A stronger rendering of Luke’s words might lead us to see that what couldn’t be wholly believed was not the resurrection but the joy that comes from it, and that, in the light of God’s redeeming, life shows itself to be all the more wonderful –

infinitely so. Jesus was with them. This was unquestioned. It was the disciples' rejoicing in this fact that was beyond expression. Jesus was with them. Life endures. Companionship abides. Our lives don't slowly fall away into an irretrievable past. They are, instead, being collected into a marvelous future. The disbelief that Luke mentioned wasn't a matter of insufficient evidence about rising from the dead; it was the disciples' register of God's incomprehensible gift in coming to them again: how astounding, how incredible. And thus, how extravagant our time is, even, as Luke indicated, in the common act of sharing and eating food together as friends.

Here, at the end, what Luke began at Christmas comes to fruition, and just as intimately. These words, too, allow us to feel that we can nearly literally touch this mystery of our communion with God in life. He pulls us so close to the heart of our own being, and, then, in the very same moment, announces that here, in resurrection, in flesh and blood, God is present with us... always. The gift to us, as it was given to the disciples, is that our disbelief can be completely resituated, from habits of doubt, which continually whittle away and make all things small, to habits of joy, which continually reveal the world's abundance and thereby sets us at peace. And this is where our own discipleship begins, in this single expression, surprising, unsettling, and marvelous: we are those who are disbelieving. But we are those who are disbelieving in exactly this manner... for joy and wonder.

Very few people either inside or outside the church today would recognize this as the prime character of Christianity. We have earned a far less stellar reputation. It's for us to reclaim and make known the resurrection's true grace, for the benefit of the whole world.

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