

Easter 3B 2021 Sermon

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus himself stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

He didn't know how it had come about – his estrangement from his mother. He had grown up in a loving, Christian family, and had always felt close to his parents. And yet, here he was: himself an adult, married to a wonderful wife, with two wonderful children of his own – a loving family, just like his was, growing up. But, now, the harsh, undeniable reality was that he had not spoken to his mother in over a year. The gulf between them had simply become unbridgeable.

It wasn't just one event – some monumental falling-out; it had happened gradually, over time. Hurtful things said. Disagreements over politics or how he and his wife were raising their children and handling their affairs. There was a gradual drifting apart, disaffection, and discord, until, finally, the hurtfulness was too much; and out of a need to protect himself and his family from that hurt, all communication ended, and there had been a parting of ways.

And then it happened: the massive heart attack. His mother was rushed to the hospital, and emergency surgery was performed on her. But there were serious complications, and it looked like she wasn't going to make it. There had been a period when her blood pressure had dropped, and the flow of oxygen to her brain and other vital organs had plummeted.

She was in a coma for weeks, in intensive care for over a month, and in the hospital for another several months. But then, gradually, her body began to heal. It was a slow process; and the recovery of her cognitive functions was even slower. But now, over a year after the heart attack, she had completely recovered. Her doctors were amazed; they said it was a miracle that she had survived.

But **he** knew that the miracle of her recovery was nothing compared to the miracle of the restoration of his relationship with his mother. That relationship had died and had been buried, for over a year; and he had had no hope that it could ever be healed. But now, it was alive again. Loving relationship – totally unexpected! – was restored. There was *resurrection*: life from death.

My friends, I believe that our understanding of Easter and resurrection tends to be, sadly, limited. We tend to think of it only as something that happened in the past and gives us a promised future. Easter is all about what happened to Jesus of Nazareth, 2000 years ago. He died, and rose from the dead. And since he has conquered death, that means that when **we** die, *in the future*, we will live again in heaven. In short, our traditional understanding of Easter and resurrection tends to be this: something happened to *Jesus* in the **past** which positively affects what will happen to *us* in the **future**.

But what about the present? What about here, and now? In the typical understanding of Easter, the only effect that Jesus' resurrection has on our *present* lives is to make us grateful for Jesus, and to give us the blessed assurance that we will have eternal life when we die.

And yet, in Eastertide, we do not begin our services by proclaiming, "Alleluia! Christ **was** risen!" but rather, "Alleluia! Christ **is** risen." Here and now. In our opening hymn today, Mary sang: "Christ **is** alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine, but saving, healing, here and now, and touching **every** place and time."¹ The power of resurrection is meant to change **us**, *here* and *now*.

It changed Jesus. For, Jesus' resurrection was not simply a restoration of his physical body to the way it used to be. As I mentioned in my sermon last week, the resurrected Jesus is, in some ways, the *same*; and in some ways, *new* and different. Neither Mary Magdalene nor the two disciples on the road to Emmaus recognize the Risen Christ at first; and his resurrected body can pass through walls and disappear in an instant. And yet, while the Risen Christ is *different* from the earthly Jesus in these ways, the Gospel writers are adamant and united in trying to convey to us readers that Christ has not lost his total identification with humanity. He still shares completely in human suffering; still bears the wounds of his crucifixion. And in *today's* Gospel, Luke clearly wants us to understand that the figure of the risen Christ that appears to the disciples is **not** a ghost. "Ghosts," writes John Shea, "are the disembodied presence of people who have died and are still considered dead."² But the early Christians who experienced the risen Christ unambiguously asserted that he was **not** dead, but *alive*.

South African poet and spiritual teacher John van de Lars suggests – helpfully, I believe – that we can better understand this "same-yet-new" aspect of the risen Christ if we see it in the context of the ongoing evolution of creation – both material evolution and spiritual evolution. "[R]esurrection changes those who are resurrected," van de Lars states... An evolutionary view of resurrection... fits

what we know of the world and of ourselves much better than the traditional view. Resurrection is a constant unfolding reality of our universe. It's an integral feature of evolution. In evolution, whatever dies, comes alive in a new way, or generates some kind of new life. In evolutionary theology we recognize that we see resurrection happening everywhere, right here and now, not just a long time ago.

“Night and day is a kind of resurrection; summer and winter is a kind of resurrection. The metamorphosis of all sorts of creatures [like caterpillars and butterflies] – that’s a kind of resurrection...”³ St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived!” (2 Cor. 5:17, CEB) And again, Paul wrote to the Philippians, “All I want is to know Christ and the power that raised him to life.” (Philippians 3:10, CEV) To know the power that raised Christ to life: **resurrection** power.

My *friend*, whose story I told at the beginning of this sermon, **knows** that resurrection power; he **knows** that power which raised Jesus from death to life. For my friend’s relationship with his mother had died; and, like Jesus’ disciples, he never expected something that had died to come to life again. None of us ever does. I know that my friend would never have wished his experience on anyone; nobody *enjoys* experiencing death of *any* kind – death of a relationship, death of a loved one, death of our ego, or whatever. But, at times in our lives, things **need** to be allowed to die; because without a death, there can **be** no resurrection. As Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” (John 12:24)

Dying to some part of our life, letting go of something we have held for a long time but which we now need to release, can be hard; and most often, it’s *not* something we choose. Such was the case with my friend. But he is now grateful for what arose out of the death of his *previous* relationship with his mother. He told me, “Mark, God never wastes anything.”

My friends, resurrection is in the very DNA of the universe: stars dying and being born. And some of that dust from dying stars created the very elements that now make up everything we see – even the cells of our own bodies. And speaking of the cells of our bodies, **they** are constantly dying and being replaced. Our bodies produce more than 10 million new cells every second as we rebuild our tissues, replacing what has died. Death and resurrection, repeated again and again, within the very cells of our bodies.

Richard Rohr states, “I believe the Christian faith is saying that the pattern of transformation is always death *transformed*, not death avoided. The universal spiritual pattern is death and resurrection, or loss and renewal, if you prefer. That is always a disappointment to humans, because we want one without the other—transformation without cost or surrender.

“We ordinarily learn to submit and surrender to this scary pattern only when reality *demand*s it of us... [We] Christians are helped by the fact that Jesus literally **submitted** to it... [and] Jesus is our guide, the ‘pioneer and perfecter of our faith,’ as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it (12:2).”⁴

But here’s the thing, my friends: we do not have to wait for this process of death and resurrection to happen. As Richard Rohr puts it, “You can begin resurrection today and tomorrow. ...Resurrection happens every time you love someone back even though they were not very loving to you. At that moment, you have been raised from the dead. Every time you refuse to become negative, cynical, hopeless, [every time you let go of your need to be right, your need to win; let go of your small self] - you have experienced the risen Christ. You don’t have to wait for it later. It’s always now and now and now.”⁵

AMEN

1 “Christ is Alive! Let Christians sing” by Brian Wren. Words © 1975, rev. 1995 Hope Publishing Company, Reprinted with permission under ONE LICENSE #A-720388 All rights reserved.

2 John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 118

3 “How Resurrection Drives Evolution,” video by John van de Laar
<https://evofaith.com/how-resurrection-drives-evolution/>

4 <https://www.providencechurch.co.uk/download/852bbb91-7c8e-11ea-a069-8964ee4be764/>

5 *ibid.*