

Easter 1 (First after)

I John 5:4ff.

John 20:19ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

As with all sacred texts we read for study, personal devotion, or corporate worship, to have integrity and to hear the whole story, it is critical to see them as they are connected to one another within narrative the storyteller is weaving. We have to hear what has come just prior and sometimes after as well. If you come in and hear a flushing sound with a 3 year old saying, “Uh Oh”, then you need to know if it is paper or a tennis ball that is getting the treatment! Context is everything.

Today's Gospel reading is no exception. The first part of John's telling of Easter gives us Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb only to think the body of Jesus has been stolen, followed by Peter and the other disciple in a race to peer in, but then going off without so much as a comment. Next we find Mary once again looking into an empty grave space and being confronted by two angels—messengers. Then we are told of her confusion about a missing body as she speaks with what turns out to be a not-so-missing Lord. And finally, she runs to tell the disciples the good news, that in Jesus, death has met its match. All that is enough to create some confusion, and now we come to today. And what day is it?

Well, if we find the disciples huddled together behind closed doors due to being paralyzed with fear, it must be the first Sunday after (or within) Easter!! It might well strike us in our day and time that these folks could have used a bit better press agent or a gifted spin doctor, because they do not stand in particularly radiant or flattering light in this lesson, especially if we consider their behavior in light of what they have just heard from Mary Magdalene. These followers of Jesus, hand-picked to carry and embody his message, are hoping to go unnoticed and unfound. Not only is it unheroic, but it is puzzling as well. If those who held Him to be Messiah seek anonymity how can the world around them find his life and work as the truth, to bring hope, to shatter the power of death?

So, what are we to make of this picture of our gathered forebearers in the faith? What might St. John be doing by giving us this portrait of the Church's great 'legion of honor', the Apostles? And why might he draw them in this light which is so pensive and fearful? There is substance here to be explored as we are presented a moment to ponder what their behavior and actions mean and represent. And do not forget for one moment that these are the same folk who went on to change the world!

St. John paints them in chaos, having denied the One who called them to follow, and now locked away. It is the first day of the week. Why does John bother with that detail? Because it is Genesis all over again—the creation is brought into being and it is good, and now on this day a new creation has begun. Then Jesus shows them his wounds. Easter doesn't ignore Good Friday, but takes the sacrifice and suffering which was due to our sin and makes it health and healing. The chaos and darkness of sin and death are overrun by Divine Mercy and Love.

I think there are at least two things the Evangelist is seeking to create for his hearers across the years. The first is a point of contact with the real world of women and men; both that of the

disciples and ours. The second is to show that standing in the shadow of the resurrection is not about us, our strengths or weaknesses, but about what God is willing to do in spite of human limitations, because in the end this is not about our courage or knowing, but about God's abiding purposes.

First, the point of contact is simply the human dilemma of struggle, confusion, and the power of fear. These followers closed themselves off from the world assuming that the object of their threat and anxiety was 'out there' among the Romans. But can we catch the irony here? They may have locked out the authorities, but they have locked themselves "in" with fear, guilt, and trepidation. An acquaintance of mine, Gordon Lathrop, professor of liturgical theology in Chicago and Philadelphia once made the comment (paraphrased), "Knock on any door in your parish and you will find behind it some measure of agony and fear. At times it is immediate and apparent (due to a crisis or event), and on other occasions dimly seen, but no less real." The authorities that cause us to lose sleep or wrestle with fear are of a different visage than those the disciples had in mind, but no less real. We wonder about our health and physical circumstances and that of those we love. We are quizzed about our substance and resources and whether they will be sufficient. We attend to family members whose behavior is self-destructive and we mourn the costs without having the power to make things right. For me, fear is the response to the threat of losing the future to frailty and the more focused I become on myself, the more angst becomes a companion. You have your own lists. Regardless of the specifics, it is depleting and locks out for us energy and joy. Perhaps what the author of this Gospel is doing is showing us that the journey of the Christian Faith is a very human walk, and that Easter's power to bring life and hope came tainted and colored through suffering and death, but those powers lost in the end! Even those closest to Jesus were not exempt from misunderstanding and fear. We share with them common ground.

But, there is a second thing to be heard in the Gospel. And this just might cause anxiety as well. It is that the Risen One is not limited by our perception, desires, or to working in the ways we would most like. "Peace be with you" is not simply a well wished greeting to have a nice day!! Shalem Alekela is a reminder that the Kingdom of God is being brought more and more fully to collide with this world and our lives. St. Cyril of Alexandria commented, "When Christ greeted his holy disciples with the words, Peace be with you, by peace he meant himself...it is in fact the Spirit of Christ, who fills all those who share in him with every blessing." Jesus unlocked the power of death and then called upon those who love and follow him to do the same—"As the Father has sent me, I send you". Every mass when the Confession is prayed, an absolution is declared by the priest. This is not well-wishing that your guilt be assuages; it is a sacramental act because Christ is offering it. He comes to set us free from bondage to those things that frighten us, by simply walking beside us and showing us those things we fear are limited in what they threaten, but HE IS NOT!!! And sometimes, perhaps quite often the Risen Lord unfolds the power of his endless life in his people.

In the movie, *Forrest Gump*, the protagonist, played beautifully by Tom Hanks, is a man who is not particularly bright by the world's standards. He has numerous gaps in his abilities and has a childlike naivete in how he deals with his environment. In spite of all his missteps and deficits he is able to achieve remarkable things, most of all in his ability to experience love and affect the lives of those he cherishes. After an illustrious college football career he joins the Army, which in the late 60's plants him in Vietnam, and there he meets a friend, Bubba, and his immediate officer, Lt. Dan. The Lt. comes from a long and distinguished line of military heroes who have

given their lives in service to the country, he believes his destiny is to do the same, die in battle, and perhaps receive the Medal of Honor posthumously. Valiant in protecting his men, he is severely wounded and sees this as his moment of personal success. He will now join that train of father, grandfather, great grandfather, and so on, which he images in gilded paintings far back into history...EXCEPT...Forrest rescues him from death, which he does not want, and cursing all the way to salvation he knows he will now simply be wounded and ordinary, not the hero he imagines. We are taken up and down the streets of his inner battle, but in the end that journey turns him into a person who is more than he could have dreamed of becoming. He is transformed by the power of life.

To stand in the shadow of the resurrection is to receive the peace of Christ which passes all understanding, but transforms us from death to life. I often have been offered the gift of being with people as they move toward physical death. One of the things that happens in those times is that many begin to sift through what they have and what they consider important and start of let go of patterns of worry, of imperatives that have driven them, and in that process come to see what really matters and they arrive at a place where they are set free from fear and triviality. They come to hallow moments of true peace and benediction.

The Church, disciples gathered, with all its faults and missteps; with its' frail followers alongside stronger ones, is sent into the world to do its' Lord's bidding. That bidding is to knock on the doors of peoples' lives where they live in fear and hurt, in hopelessness and yearning, and point to the One who has set us free; who is present in all places, all moments, in all creation, and that no closed door can keep out. Amen+