

A New Creation

Today is often referred to as Low Sunday. You know why. Just look around. Last week it was standing room only. This week? Well, you can all stretch out a bit!

It's a hope we preachers have that the message the big crowd got last week would so enthrall them, so move them, that all anyone could think about all week was getting back to church today. Not because of the preacher, but because of the astonishing news that in Jesus, everything has changed.

That in Jesus, we get a glimpse of what awaits each and every one of us. Who wouldn't want to know more about where we're heading, and what awaits us when we get there?

I know you do; and I know I do too.

So let's together pick up where we left off last week, with that cheeky angel and those frightened women and the Risen Lord, who meets them on the path.

Because the question then, the question now, is "did it really happen?"

Today we read about the Apostle known forever as "Doubting Thomas." A cruel and undeserved nickname because, among the first followers, none believed without seeing him, without touching him.

Matthew tells us that when the eleven met Jesus on the mountain in Galilee "they fell down before him, but some doubted." Mt. 28:17.

The early disciples were a lot like us as they lived with and spoke with Jesus. They saw him, as so many do today, as a wise teacher, a brave prophet, a man with a gift for healing.

But nothing more.

So they followed him, yes. But, they mostly admired him.

Like us.

That's why, I think, the Apostles scoffed at Mary's news of seeing the Lord. That's why, I think, the Lord showed himself, nail marks and all, to the ones cowering in the locked room.

It's why Thomas, a week later, insisted on getting the same evidence the other 10 already got when, a week earlier the Lord showed each of them his hands and his side.

As much as the resurrection mystifies us today, the first followers were just as mystified; probably more so.

People then weren't somehow more willing than people today to believe someone can rise from the dead.

They were people of the earth.

They had plenty of hands-on experience with death. People then died at home, not in hospitals. The dead bodies were prepared by family, not professionals who swoop in and carry away the deceased, presently them days later dressed and groomed.

People then knew what we know now: the dead stay dead.

So the notion of a resurrected person, alive in a new body, similar to what he was, yet at the same time so different too, well, some

will say, if you buy that, I've got a bridge to sell you in Brooklyn, cheap!

Particularly today, some of our most prominent theologians can't swallow that the Jesus who was crucified is the Jesus who came to his friends that Sunday: the same Jesus, yet somehow different; real, and alive, and embodied!

So the Marcus Borg's and Dominic Crossan's and Bishop Spong's (these are the big shots in the world of religion today) say (do we say it too?) that the disciples, well, something just told them to keep doing Jesus' work.

Or, they believed Jesus' soul went to heaven.

Or, it was a mass hallucination.

Anything as long as what happened can be logically explained, clearly understood, rational.

Because, that's what we're good at.

Making sense of things.

Explaining things.

Being reasonable and fair-minded.

That's us!

The only problem with those explanations is that the disciples weren't much different from us.

Which is why, I think, the gospels, and every one of them, go to such lengths to describe the fear, the awe, the surprise, the sheer astonishment of these encounters with Jesus.

Something so strange, so inexplicable, that words fail.

So strange, so inexplicable, and yet, and yet, so utterly real.

And when you think about it, what else but bolt from the blue encounters with the Risen Jesus accounts for the total change in those eleven terrified, demoralized, defeated men?

From that time on, they become fearless witnesses of what God has done.

Just listen to what that thick headed, quick-tempered, denier of Jesus does after meeting the Risen Lord:

"Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed the multitude, "You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God -- this man, you crucified and killed. This Jesus --- God raised up, and of that, all of us are witnesses."

And what is God doing by raising up Jesus?

We usually say God is saving us, and that is true.

But that is not all.

You see, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the task God set out to bring to a finish in Jesus, it's not just about us.

(How rude!)

It is that, but not only that.

In John's gospel, Jesus performed 7 signs.

Sound familiar?

As in 7 days.

Like the 7 days of creation?

The first sign is changing the water into wine at Cana.

Second: Jesus heals the official's son.

Third sign: Jesus heals the man who sat at the edge of the healing pool for a million years.

Fourth: He feeds the 5000.

Fifth: He walks on water.

Sixth: He gives sight to the blind man with spit and mud.

Seventh: He raises smelly Lazarus from the dead.

7 signs, just like the 7 days of creation.

See the connection with something even larger than just our salvation?

In 7 days, God creates all that exists.

Jesus performs 7 signs, signaling the dawn of a new creation.

But wait.

In fact, with Jesus, there are 8 signs.

The 7th day is the Sabbath. The day God rested.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus wasn't raised on the Holy Day, but one day later?

Perhaps it's because in Jesus, a new day is made.

The resurrection happens on the 8th day, and it happens in the garden (remember, Mary mistakes him for the gardener!); just like the first garden at the dawn of creation.

In the resurrection of Jesus, God is making all of creation new again.

The death that Adam brought into the garden of Eden is now defeated in the garden of the resurrection.

The twisting of creation that Adam began when he decided what is good and what is evil is now restored by Jesus, who is the standard for what is good and what is evil.

God, in Jesus, not only rescues you and I; God, in Jesus, rescues all of creation.

Hold on, you may say. Things don't look so rescued. In fact, things are looking mighty desperate.

Yet we, just like the first Apostles, who also lived in desperate times, are invited to look deeper, to see, to hear, the still, small voice of God moving in this desperate world of ours, like yeast in the dough, like seeds scattered.

Ours is not a God who clobbers us over the head in an effort to force us to believe.

Ours is a God who invites us on a journey, and who discloses herself along the way.

Just so with the resurrection.

Remember, he didn't go to Pontius Pilate or the high priests or the Roman soldiers.

He showed himself to only a few, to those who knew him well enough to be able to say that the Jesus we followed is the same Jesus who meets us in the locked room, the same Jesus who cooks us breakfast at the lakeside, the same Jesus who walks with us to Emmaus...and yes, even some of these doubted, as if to say to the generations that followed, don't worry so much about your doubts, keep walking, it will all be ok.

As we begin this Easter season, may you too come face to face with the Jesus who lives, not only then, but now, this Jesus is invading our world as surely as he has invaded all of those yesterdays.

But I do have a warning for you. When you meet him, you will be changed; and you may become strange.

As one who met him once has said: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd." Flannery O'Connor.

Let it be so.

+amen

