

Practicing Resurrection

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4th Class

Introduction/Review: Looking at Lent as a Journey from Death to Life

The Season of Lent is often viewed as a journey in which we are saved from our sins. Last Sunday, we began Lent by revisiting Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, and we were invited in the Collect for that day (the summary prayer at the beginning of the Liturgy) to recognize the "weaknesses of each of us." As we make our way in Lent, our Collect trace out a particular path of transformation: penance (BCP Collect for the Second Sunday of Lent), renewal (BCP Collect for the Third Sunday of Lent), refreshment (BCP Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Lent), and grace (BCP Collect for the Fifth Sunday in Lent).

By doing so, our liturgies follow a well-worn path and assign to us traditional readings that have been followed for many years. The goal of these readings is to point us in the direction of the Atonement -- on what it takes for us to be made right with God, which Christians believe happened at the crucifixion, when Jesus died for our sins on the cross. On the cross, Jesus offered a sacrifice, or prayer, that we could not offer on our behalf so that we would find forgiveness for all the ways that we have been less than who God created us to be. On the cross, Jesus defeated the power of death, died for our sins, and showed us God's infinite love for us.

However, I believe there is another way to go through Lent, which has been obscured by this familiar path. This way looks at Jesus's journey to Jerusalem not as a walk from life to death, but as journey from death to life.

In this journey, the Resurrection is not a reward or surprise-ending waiting to appear after Jesus has died, and all seems lost, but as a reality that begins to emerge as Jesus is making his way to Jerusalem. Therefore, Jesus is not so much walking to his death, but walking to his life. And this is good news for us, because in the process, Jesus is revealing to us what it means to live as if death were not the end. To say a bit more about some key Christian practices:

- **Loving:** This means that every moment that we love, our love goes with the grain of the universe. Our love is a participation in God's love. Every act of love is an expression of the love that is stronger than death.
- **Forgiving:** This means that we forgive not simply because Jesus has forgiven us, but because our forgiveness participates in God's infinite power to reconcile all things. Our forgiveness is the work of Christ's forgiveness in us, Christ's resurrection power in us.

- **Giving:** This means that when we give ourselves to others, we participate in what Christ is always already giving us. That is to say, Jesus's death on the cross does not exhaust all of what Christ has given to God, or sacrificed, on our behalf. Rather, Jesus is continuing to pour his sacrificial love on us and our world each day. As a result, when we give ourselves away, we are not losing ourselves but gaining ourselves.
- **Living:** This means that our life is found in the relationships we build rather than in the achievements we attain. It means that a central part of what it means to be a Christian is to learn how to die in order to learn how to live. It also means that in God's economy of grace, nothing is wasted. There is no excess or defect in what God has made. There is no moment or event that will not be reconciled and transformed by grace. Therefore, everything that happens to us not only happens for a reason, but we begin to practice the power of resurrection in our lives when we use the different ways that we have experienced death as a means to life.

I. Opening Poem

Torn

let's break ourselves open
 let our insides out
 the tender parts we hide and protect
 the heart was never meant
 to shelter in place
 it heals
 by bleeding

II. Matthew 28:1-20 – Resurrection as Mission

Tonight, we will look at Matthew's portrayal of Jesus' Resurrection:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he^(a) lay. ⁷Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead,^(b) and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you." ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

¹¹While they were going, some of the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. ¹²After the priests^[c] had assembled with the elders, they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ ¹⁴If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” ¹⁵So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day.

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”^[d]

III. Resurrection as the Completion of the Incarnation

Matthew’s Gospel draws heavily from the Gospel of Mark, which was written earlier. One can see images and even language from Mark that Matthew wove into his larger and more elaborate gospel.

As we noted last week, Mark’s Gospel is marked by the oral traditions about Jesus that informed it. This orality shapes the way Matthew tells his story of the Resurrection of Jesus as a living reality that pivots around the empty tomb.

The first few lines of Matthew basically repeat the Gospel of Mark’s ending with little variation. Then, after seeing the empty tomb and hearing the angel’s proclamation, Matthew depicts Jesus as appearing to the women. We read:

Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

So begins a second way of speaking about Jesus’ resurrection. Instead of bearing witness to the “empty tomb”, Matthew writes about Jesus “appearing.” In the Gospels of Luke and John, these appearances will be written about in more elaborate ways. In these gospels, instead of Galilee, Jesus will appear to his disciples in and around Jerusalem – on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35) and in Jerusalem itself (John 20:1-30). For some New Testament scholars, this means that the early church had both an “empty tomb” tradition and an “appearance” tradition as independent, oral traditions within the early Christian church.

However, I want to suggest that both the empty tomb and the appearance hold together in Matthew’s Gospel, because Matthew’s prime intent is to speak about the Resurrection as the completion of Christ’s Incarnation.

That is to say, at the beginning of Matthew's Gospel (1:23), the angel Gabriel proclaims to Joseph,

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,”
which means, “God is with us.”

The root of this prophesy is Isaiah 7:14, which reads:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman^[a] is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

One reason Matthew did so is to “prove” that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies in the Hebrew Bible concerning the Messiah, and throughout his Gospel, you will find sixteen moments where Matthew argues that Jesus “fulfilled” (Gk: Pleroo) the Scriptures. For example, he writes in chapter 5:17, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.”

Some argue that the reason Matthew was so concerned to show these connections is that there was conflict between the Jewish-Christian community and the Jewish community that refused to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah. We see some of that conflict in vs. 11-15 above, where the chief priests and elders in Jerusalem connive to suppress the news of Jesus' resurrection by circulating a rumor that his disciples stole Christ's body.

However, one way to see how Matthew brings these different strands together is by seeing how the Resurrection of Jesus mirrors and completes the Incarnation of Jesus. The clue to this reading is the promise that Jesus gives to his disciples when he says, “And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” This is a reiteration at the end of Matthew's Gospel of its beginning, for Jesus, Matthew says, is “Emmanuel,” or “God with us.”

The empty tomb and the appearance tradition are then two sides of what it means for God in be incarnate. For Jesus was fully God and fully human in such a way that the fullness of each was never compromised. Jesus was fully Transcendent (the Empty Tomb) and fully Immanent (his Appearance). The resurrection therefore plays a critical role in ending the story as Matthew sees it – no other ending can do, which is why he feels it necessary to refute any other ending.

What does it mean to see the Resurrection as the completion of the Incarnation? I want to suggest that we find something powerful in the first lines of the Resurrection as Matthew tells it: the word for “earthquake” (*seismos*) is the root of the terror the guards of the tomb experience, who are literally shaken (*eseisthesan*). Variations of the same word appear when Jesus stills the storm (8:24) and when the resurrection began to break forth after Jesus was raised (27:54).

The same kind of power is revealed to us when we begin to experience the Resurrection in our own lives. In Matthew there is a curious moment at Jesus' death, which he breathes his last (27:50). This is what he writes (27:51-54):

At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. ⁵²The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised. ⁵³After his resurrection they came out of the tombs and entered the holy city and appeared to many. ⁵⁴Now when the centurion and those with him, who were keeping watch over Jesus, saw the earthquake and what took place, they were terrified and said, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

The Resurrection is more than a metaphor for Matthew, more than a convenient way to end the story and sew up loose ends. For Matthew, the news of the Resurrection should shake us to the core.

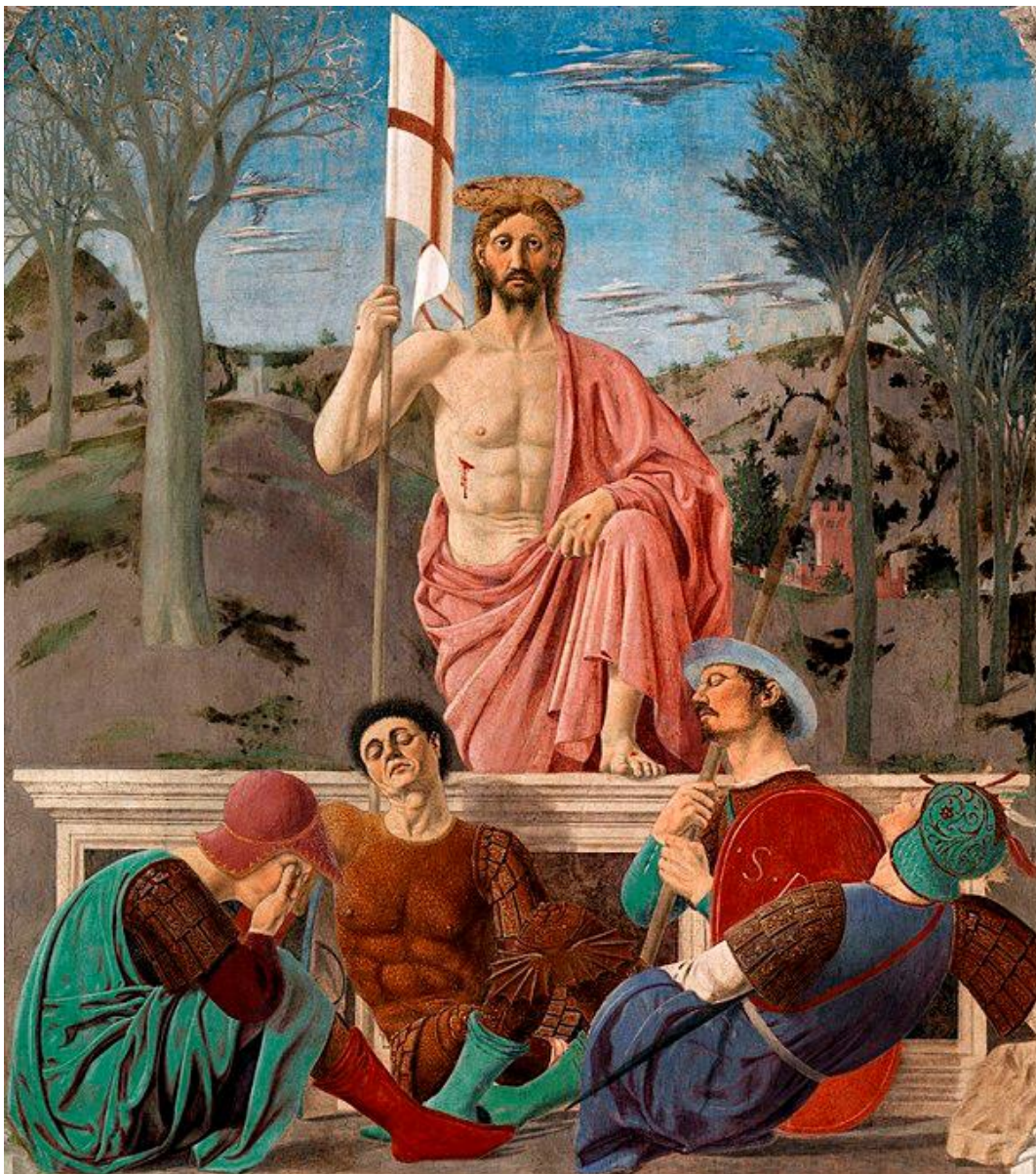
Finally, like the coming of Jesus from God, the Resurrection means that God is with us in a powerful way, which is why Matthew concludes with an early baptismal formula, directing his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (v 51.).

That is to say, our identity is shaped by this seismic change of God within us. We are joined to God and we changed from within.

V. Art – Three Songs

What does it mean to live into this seismic identity? What does it mean to see God's love for Christ and the presence of Christ extended throughout the world?

Depictions of Mathew's Resurrection can seem as the Resurrection is a little too solid. Here is a depiction by Piero della Francesca (1415-1492) from the 1460's:



To add a little life and movement to this story, I have asked Jennifer Demello-Johnson to sing three songs, and I have supplied the Lyrics below to help us follow along:

“The Old Rugged Cross” George Bennard (1873-1958)

On a hill far away stood an old rugged cross,
The emblem of suffering and shame;
And I love that old cross where the dearest and best
For a world of lost sinners was slain.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

O that old rugged cross, so despised by the world,
Has a wondrous attraction for me;
For the dear Lamb of God left His glory above
To bear it to dark Calvary.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

In that old rugged cross, stained with blood so divine,
A wondrous beauty I see,
For 'twas on that old cross Jesus suffered and died,
To pardon and sanctify me.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

To the old rugged cross I will ever be true;
Its shame and reproach gladly bear;
Then He'll call me some day to my home far away,
Where His glory forever I'll share.

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
 Till my trophies at last I lay down;
 I will cling to the old rugged cross,
 And exchange it some day for a crown.

“What the World Needs Now is Love,” words by Hal David (1921-2012) and music Burt Bacharach (1928-present), 1965

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
 It's the only thing that there's just too little of
 What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
 No not just for some but for everyone.

Lord, we don't need another mountain,
 There are mountains and hillsides enough to climb
 There are oceans and rivers enough to cross,
 Enough to last till the end of time.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
 It's the only thing that there's just too little of
 What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
 No, not just for some but for everyone.

Lord, we don't need another meadow
 There are cornfields and wheat fields enough to grow
 There are sunbeams and moonbeams enough to shine
 Oh listen, lord, if you want to know.

What the world needs now is love, sweet love
 It's the only thing that there's just too little of
 What the world needs now is love, sweet love,
 No, not just for some but for everyone.
 No, not just for some, oh, but just for everyone.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow” Israel Kamakawiwo‘ole (1959-1957)

Ooh, ooh, ooh
Ooh, ooh
Somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
And the dreams that you dream of
Once in a lullaby

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
And the dreams that you dream of
Dreams really do come true

Someday, I wish upon a star
Wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where trouble melts like lemon drops
High above the chimney top
That's where you'll find me

Somewhere over the rainbow
Bluebirds fly
And the dreams that you dare to
Oh why, oh why can't I?

Well, I see trees of green and red roses too
I'll watch them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself
What a wonderful world

Well, I see skies of blue and I see clouds of white
And the brightness of day
I like the dark
And I think to myself what a wonderful world

The colors of the rainbow so pretty in the sky
And also on the faces of people passing by
I see friends shaking hands saying
How do you do?
They're really saying I, I love you

I hear babies cry and I watch them grow
They'll learn much more than we'll know
And I think to myself what a wonderful world

Someday I wish upon a star
Wake up where the clouds are far behind me
Where trouble melts like lemon drops
High above the chimney top
That's where you'll find me
Oh, somewhere over the rainbow
Way up high
And the dreams that you dare to
Why oh, why can't I?
Ooh, ooh
Ooh, ooh