

Doubting Thomas and the Resurrection

Biblical Texts:

John 20:19-31

Acts 4:32-35

This week's Gospel reading is from John. It's a week after the Resurrection. All the other apostles have already experienced the risen Jesus except Thomas who's told the others he simply won't believe it until he sees the nail holes. The Gospel emphasizes that all the doors are shut tight, but Jesus appears among the disciples, anyway, and Thomas "sees for himself" ... and confesses his faith: "My Lord and my God!" But Jesus then says, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe."

The reading this week from Acts is about the economic sharing of the early Christian community—actually of *many* of the early Christian communities: "The whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." I'd like to suggest that one way those two passages are linked is that the presence of the "risen Jesus"—whatever that means—is at the center of the "one heart and soul" that makes radical Christian community possible. In the language of Fred's sermon last week, Jesus is "massively present" in the church.

So, I'd like to talk this morning about the Resurrection, about Jesus' presence, and about this community.

It will come as no surprise to most of you that I've always been a doubting Thomas ... only I probably wouldn't even have believed my own eyes (figuring, perhaps, it was hypnosis or something).

I have enough scientist in me that I don't believe in miracles, that is, if you define a miracle as an event that *contradicts* the known laws of science. After the death of a physical body, for instance, countless different protein enzymes, most of which are necessary for life, quickly denature into useless molecular fragments. For a body actually dead for almost forty-eight hours to come to life would defy known fundamental laws of science. I don't believe that the

physical body of Jesus was resuscitated at Easter. I doubt that that's shocking to anyone in this community anymore.

But there's a big difference between believing that life doesn't contradict science and believing that science is an adequate explanation for everything. I'm enough of a scientist to know that science understands only a minuscule part of reality. Our Biblical accounts make it very clear that something quite amazing happened on that first Easter Sunday. The disciples felt the "massive presence" of Jesus among them. This was so real, so powerful, so joyful, so liberating that they could describe it only with words that sound very much like physical resuscitation ... although when Jesus just appears inside a locked room we're obviously not talking about a physical body in the usual sense. So what "actually happened" there? If by "actually happened," one means what a video recorder and microphone would have picked up, well, we can't say. But to define reality in terms of what video and sound recording could reproduce would be silly ... as well as unscientific. The essence of science is to recognize when we don't understand something and allow its mystery to energize us.

What "actually happened" at the Resurrection is that the disciples experienced the presence of Jesus in a way that utterly transformed them from a bunch of sniveling whiners into healers, preachers, organizers and powerful advocates for justice and compassion. They stood up to their culture—some at the cost of their lives—welcoming and equalizing slave and free, Jew and Gentile, poor and rich. They created communities of economic sharing, as difficult and counter cultural then as they are now. They stood up to the power of Rome. Just because we don't know how to describe scientifically what happened at the Resurrection, doesn't mean that we don't know what happened: The disciples experienced Jesus amazingly among them and were transformed.

For most of the time since Marja and I came to the Church of the Saviour in 1983, I've been reluctant to call myself a "Christian." While at Potter's House Church, I twice dropped out of covenant membership because I felt hypocritical professing the commitment. At one point, I actually went around to each of the covenant members, outlined my beliefs, and asked them if my beliefs "qualified" me to be a member. Two of my good friends said they probably did not. But Mary Cosby told me not to listen to them. Actually, it was Mary's faith in me that first rooted me in this community. I would waiver as to my belonging, but Mary was always certain. Somehow, she knew that Jesus was at the center of my life even if I didn't.

Think of that! Here's Mary Cosby—one of the rocks on which Jesus' church is founded—and she's telling someone that even if he can't see it or understand it, Jesus is at the center of his life. Now it's true that Mary could always find some positive word about *anybody*, but I doubt

that she'd speak loosely about something as important as this. Clearly this concept of Jesus-as-the-center-of-one's-life is bigger and less specific than it first appears.

In preparing for this teaching, I've thought a lot about why I've wanted to be part of this community. We moved to DC for just that purpose, and the only reason I still put up with living in a city is to be a part of this community. After conversations with Fred over the past several weeks, I'm beginning to think that my desire to belong here has much to do with that "massive presence" of Jesus in this community. In fact, I want to be a part of this community in part precisely because some of you experience Christ so deeply and personally. I don't want to be in a church with people like me. I need you others whose beliefs may be different.

The language that Fred uses to express his Christian faith differs significantly from mine. He's a Southern Baptist preacher, reared in that evangelical tradition. I'm a product of the Social Gospel where your commitment to compassion and justice are considerably more important than your doctrine (and we didn't worry much about prayer or inner life). Fred and I have each moved some distance in the direction of the other, but in some ways he and I are still representative of some of the differences in belief here at Eighth Day. But as we've wrestled with those differences, we've come to the common conclusion that neither his language nor mine is really adequate to express Christian faith today. We need something new.

The old religious language of voices from Heaven and magical healings and resuscitation of Jesus' body no longer makes sense but humanistic activism devoid of deeper meaning doesn't begin to be an adequate expression of what we know, either.

Sixty-five years ago, while Dietrich Bonhoeffer was awaiting execution in a Nazi prison, his letters to a friend several times spoke tantalizingly of "religionless Christianity." It's not completely clear what this man of deep, Christ-centered faith meant by the term, but it seems to be what Christianity might look like if it were shorn of all its culturally conditioned presuppositions about the nature of reality and if Christ moved away from "religion" and into the very midst of our daily lives. Among the "culturally conditioned presuppositions" that Bonhoeffer mentioned were the supernatural metaphysics of the pre-scientific age, the belief that we Christians are specially favored by God because of our belief, even the importance of the interior, "spiritual" life.

I think we in this community are caught up in something like that religionless Christianity. It's not even just the language. The old *concepts*—faith rooted in the supernatural, the nature of

God's judgment, the doctrine of the atonement, Jesus as the exclusive way to salvation, indeed, even the meaning of salvation, itself—don't work for many of us anymore. The ways of speaking that have for two millennia expressed the massive presence of God in Jesus and the massive presence of Jesus in the church now, for many of us,

get in the way

of our experience of Jesus. And we don't yet have even the concepts—much less the language—to articulate what we really mean.

One approach we've tried has been to use the old language of supernatural healing, divinity, resurrection, Heaven & Hell, judgment and so on but intend them as metaphors. To some extent that's worked. But the language of metaphor is both inadequate and something of a problem.

First, it's confusing to people who aren't in on the code. So many contemporary discussions of Christianity seem grounded in the literal reading of the Bible. On the one side are the fundamentalists defending it; on the other side is a brand of assertive atheism attacking it. But both sides seem to agree that Christianity is about belief in things that science knows to be false. So, when we in our liturgy talk about, say, Jesus as "God's son," how's the newcomer to our community to know that we're speaking metaphorically?

But the bigger problem, it seems to me, is the inadequacy of metaphor: I, at least, actually mean *more* than metaphor. The early church expressed their experience in the language and concepts of the supernatural because they'd experienced something so astonishing that only that language was sufficient. But we, too, experience a "presence" in this faith community for which metaphor seems inadequate. It's metaphor when I say that my love is a red, red rose: I know Marja's not a flower. But when we say that there's a presence here in this community, we (or at least I) mean that there's something more really here, even if I can't begin to explain what that means.

It's sort of like our personal experience of our own soul. Whatever we call it, most of us know in our deepest selves that we're not just a mass of complex molecular reactions. We know that we're more than a set of behavioral responses that could be programmed into a computer. It's what makes love more than lust; what makes vocation more than "making a living;" what makes us willing to sacrifice our lives for our children. There's no way, scientifically, to prove the presence of the soul, but we all know there's something more within us that can't be explained in a scientific model.

The presence that most of us know here at Eighth Day is something like that. We know there's something very real here, something that binds us together, something we might call the presence of Jesus. We can't prove it, but we know it.

The disciples experienced God as massively present in Jesus. What might that have meant in language and concepts that make sense to us moderns? In Jesus they experienced absolute nonviolence, unconditional forgiveness, pure love, passion for justice, and deep compassion for the suffering of the world. It wasn't just that Jesus *believed in* these things or had *decided* that life was to be lived according to them. Jesus wasn't recommending them as *effective* ways of being in the world (although they're much more effective than people think). He'd *experienced* them in the bedrock of his being. When the disciples were with Jesus, they experienced love, forgiveness, nonviolence, justice and compassion as the most fundamental realities of human life. Jesus *was* those things.

And those same realities are here in this church, too. Like the disciples, we're sometimes in touch with them (and, fairly often, not), but I suspect we've all experienced them here. This presence of Jesus in our community is not just our *deciding* to adopt particular values; rather, it's our experiencing life that way, our knowing those attributes written into the deepest reality.

I used to experience something like this at Joseph's House during our community meetings with those men who were dying of AIDS. All of them had lived on the street, most had been addicted, some had lived very violent lives, and yet the depth of the love, sharing and forgiveness that I often experienced in those meetings was miraculous. There was something "more" there—a holiness—that I don't have language for.

Now, if you'd ask me why I've done what I've done, my immediate answer would *not* be to point at Jesus. I'd give you all sorts of reasons that have to do with my upbringing, my insecurities, my intellect, my privilege, my depression, my outrage and so on. I wouldn't identify Jesus as the center of my life because I don't *experience* Jesus that way. But enough people like Mary have said that they've experienced Jesus through me that my own explanations have come to seem incomplete ... even to me.

Let me tell a brief story. When the idea for creating and then living at Joseph's House was first arising in our hearts, I knew myself well enough to know that—living in that environment—I probably wouldn't survive emotionally for long. I had a sense for the severity of my depression, I'd lived enough in previous communities to know its stresses, and I was aware that many of the residents coming into the house would be addicted and difficult. I doubted that I'd last long living in Joseph's House and would crack up just as I had under the stress of country-doctoring in Minnesota.

But we were living at Christ House and in a mission group with Janelle Goetcheus. I'd seen up close what this soft-spoken, timid, almost mousey middle-aged woman could do in the face of the power and brutality of Washington, and it was clear to me that—whatever it means—her capacity came from centering her life in Jesus. Perhaps, I thought, if I stepped out in something like that faith, I, too, might be given what I needed in order to make Joseph's House possible. And I have no rational explanation for the various highly unlikely coincidences that made (and continue to make) Joseph's House possible.

Now, in fact, after three years at Joseph's House I did crack up emotionally, and it was awful. But I'd experienced so much love, so much forgiveness, so much passion for justice, so much compassion in the community that it was okay. Even in the suffering something accompanied me that made it the right thing to have done. That's about as close as I get to the experience of Jesus.

Another way of asking about the Resurrection is to ask whether Christ is at the center of this church. Obviously, I'm not the best one to answer that question, but I do know that the love, forgiveness, nonviolence, justice and compassion of Jesus are here.

I could point to almost any one of you. Why does Eve show up to get busted every time or go traipsing across the desert? Why is Sadie risking her life to go back to Zimbabwe? Why do Wendy and Dave have this community in their home? Why did Carol Bullard-Bates fight for years against impossible odds to build Bethany while also advocating for peace and justice in Palestine? Why does Dottie live at L'Arche and do so much to welcome strangers into Eighth Day? Why is Michael Schaff so faithful and so genuinely concerned with our families? And on and on around this room. The answers that most (although probably not all) of you would give would have something to do with the presence of Jesus in your life. So when I experience the nonviolence, the love, the forgiveness, the passion for justice, and the compassion in you here, that's close enough for me to experiencing Jesus as our center. I experience a goodness, a power, a love that I don't really understand. Now, I also know enough of you well enough to have experienced your pettiness, your self-centeredness, your screwed-up-ness, too. We're far

from perfect. But doesn't that make it all the more amazing? We're just normal people, who've somehow been transformed by something we can't fully explain.

And that's the Resurrection.

Christ is risen!