

Easter 3B

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin

by the Reverend James Ross Smith

Sunday, April 18, 2021

1 John 1:1–2:2; Psalm 98:1–5; Luke 24:36b-48

When I was in seminary, I took an introductory theology course with Professor Christopher Morse¹. One day, Professor Morse began his lecture on the resurrection by reading a poem, *Seven Stanzas at Easter*, that had been written by John Updike in 1960. The poem goes like this:

“Make no mistake: if he rose at all
It was as His body;
If the cell’s dissolution did not reverse,
the molecule reknit,
The amino acids rekindle,
The Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,
Each soft spring recurrent;
It was not as His Spirit in the mouths
and fuddled eyes of the
Eleven apostles;
It was as His flesh; ours.

¹ Prof. Morse was for many years the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Theology and Ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

The same hinged thumbs and toes
The same valved heart
That—pierced—died, withered, paused,
 and then regathered
Out of enduring Might
New strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,
Analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,
Making of the event a parable,
 a sign painted in the faded
Credulity of earlier ages:
Let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mâché,
Not a stone in a story,
But the vast rock of materiality that
 in the slow grinding of
Time will eclipse for each of us
The wide light of day.

And if we have an angel at the tomb,
Make it a real angel,
Weighty with Max Planck's quanta,
 vivid with hair, opaque in
The dawn light, robed in real linen
Spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,
For our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,
Lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour,
 we are embarrassed
By the miracle,
And crushed by remonstrance.”

I heard that poem for the first time that day, and I was transfixed. I was younger then, and, I suppose, ardent. I'd returned to the church not long before. I'd become an Anglican. I believed, and was determined to believe, firmly. I heard Updike's poem as a protest against the evasions of the modern theologians. I loved the poem's concreteness, and its unequivocal *yes* to the physicality of resurrection. I was unsettled, therefore, when Professor Morse finished reading the poem and said—I don't remember his exact words—but he said something like this, “What a stirring and beautiful poem, but it may not be true,” and then he began his lecture. And so, we all joined the essential, ongoing conversation about that most beautiful, difficult, and compelling mystery: the resurrection of the body, Christ's resurrection, and our own.

You and I are a part of that conversation today as we consider the passage taken from the twenty-fourth chapter of the gospel of Luke.

On the one hand, it is a passage that confirms Updike's poem. "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (24:39). The verse is deeply incarnational and very physical. Jesus, fully human, conceived in Mary's womb in the first chapter of Luke's gospel, stands among them at the gospel's end. It seems to me, therefore, that this is a verse that invites a certain kind of prayer or meditation: try and imagine reaching out to Jesus—perhaps in a time of need. Imagine him taking your hand. What would it feel like to feel that hand's warmth, to feel steadied, and anchored by his touch? How did it feel for the disciples—how does it feel for us?—to hear those reassuring words, "See. It's me. It's me and nobody else?" I imagine Jesus smiling, reaching out to me, as he asks, "Why are you troubled?" I think that Luke might understand that kind of prayer.

In all of this, Luke insists that the resurrection was real. It *happened*. It wasn't just a metaphor or a symbol. Many things—springtime flowers, recovery from an illness, forgiveness of sin—are "resurrections," and we may understand them to be linked to Jesus' resurrection, but they are not the same thing.

Still, all these years later, I wonder: does the concreteness of Updike's poem, miss something essential about Jesus' resurrection? For instance, in this morning's gospel, all those sensory details—like that broiled fish—are accompanied by words that tell us that the disciples' experience is utterly real, but also fundamentally different from anything else they've ever experienced. Jesus tries to reassure them, but they are not immediately reassured. There is something about Jesus' risen body—his risen *self*—that is different, and they know it. Since they are confused and uncertain, they depend on what they *think* they know: their dreams and their fears. Is this a ghost, a hallucination, a haunting? But they don't run away. Jesus' words are a comfort, and we witness the beginnings of trust. But, still, this is a strange experience. Luke says the disciples disbelieve and they wonder but, oddly, they also have joy in their hearts. It's as if Luke is telling us that those physical experiences—Jesus' touch, that broiled fish, all of Updike's tangible facts—are insufficient. Jesus' death on the cross was not just a bad dream. This is not a resuscitation. This is resurrection. This is a new creation. Everything is the same and yet utterly different. It is a Burning Bush experience, but it is also, paradoxically, Jesus' strong hand and breaking bread and eating fish with him, just as they have always done. It is all of those things, though that seems impossible. It is strange and beautiful all at the same time. It is the

Holy One at work in the world. And it will take the gift of a holy Spirit before the disciples can fully understand that and believe.

Perhaps like some of you, I watched the Duke of Edinburgh's funeral yesterday morning. It was in some ways a very British ritual, and so I'm not sure I understood all of the ritual's symbols, though I was impressed and moved by them. It was also a very Anglican ritual, and so I witnessed, not for the first time, the Prayer Book's unusual ability to be both powerfully emotional and utterly restrained all at once.

And there was something else that I found very moving. The Duke chose the lessons for his funeral, and he gave us something very beautiful. The first reading was from Ecclesiasticus 43, which speaks in the most profound way of God as Creator, "Look at the rainbow and praise its Maker; it shines with a supreme beauty, rounding the sky with its gleaming arc, a bow bent by the hands of the Most High . . . By his own action [God] achieves his end, and by his word all things are held together." The gospel was from John 11, "Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. And even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you.'" The shift from the first reading to the second is remarkable. The point of view of Ecclesiasticus is

cosmic. God does what we can never do. God creates the world and all that is in it. God creates. God is not just another thing in creation. God's ways are not our ways. Then, John brings us back to earth. Jesus talks to a friend that he loves, a woman whose brother has died, a man Jesus knew and loved as well. These are people, like you and me, like the Queen and her family. People with problems. People who love. People who grieve. People who want their loved ones back. And, amazingly, Jesus says that the Holy One has the power to bring life back into such sad and mournful scenes. Through the power of resurrection God makes dry bones live, and wipes every tear from our eyes.

We, like the disciples, do not always believe that all of this can be true. We grow afraid. We have questions. Our hearts are troubled. But, still, Jesus keeps coming to us, standing among us, reaching out to us, feeding us, allowing us to see him, to touch him, in the breaking of the bread.

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