

Sermon: Easter 2

Mr. Mark VandeBrake

April 12, 2015

Year B
Acts 4:32-35
Psalm 133
1 John 1:1-2:2
John 20:19-31

Some years I find that my inner life is not in tune with the liturgical season of Lent, and even during Holy Week I am too out of sync spiritually, to really participate fully. I find, I sometimes don't feel a need to confess my sins as much as to be healed of my soul's wounds. Family, institutions, and empire all can abuse and wound our inner being through no fault of our own, and we need our dignity and humanity restored as well as our sins forgiven. Jesus, who was nonviolent, committed no actual crime, but he was killed as a preemptive measure because Rome valued security over justice. This year, while working on this sermon, I made the connection that the inner wounds I received from the structural injustices in society, somehow were connected to Jesus' wounds, and that, in fact, all the wounds of innocent victims from some form of oppression, were borne by Jesus into death, and through brokenness, into a transfigured new form.

In our Gospel reading, Thomas, who missed Jesus' first appearance to the disciples on Easter evening, says he won't believe unless he can put his hands on the Risen Jesus's wounds. These wounds which were inflicted on Jesus by the Roman Empire, which placed no value on the human lives of outsiders, were no longer bleeding and torn, but in a sense badges of honor, in a new body that was not limited by space and time. Touching Jesus' transformed wounds was a conversion moment for Thomas. This was not just a reanimation of dead flesh as with Lazarus, but God's vindication of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God and the divine life that cannot be extinguished, only renewed into a subtler form of energy.

However after 2000 years, if we look around, empire in its various forms is still seemingly as strong as it was, and the Kingdom of God is often stalled, as believers

look to the past or future, but are not cooperating with the Spirit in the present. There are still believers waiting, as the early church did, for the Second Coming, passively expecting God to intervene with supernatural power, and rapturing them away out of danger. There are believers with closed minds, so set on believing the literal words of the Bible as the Word of God, that they can't hear the voice of Jesus the Word of God speaking to them. There are believers who feel natural disasters are God's punishment for the immorality of those outside their group. There is much certainty, which masks their repressed fear and confusion about God. It seems that much of Christianity is stuck in a rut, reacting defensively to perceived threats, rather than questioning their assumptions and deepening their faith. Sr. Joan Chittister has a new book called *Between the Dark and the Daylight: Embracing the Contradictions of Life*. She writes about "the tense and tender relationship between confusion and creativity. Chaos is its own kind of order. Creativity is what a person makes out of this confusion. This emerging new order, forged out of disarray and shaped into vision, defies the future. In the end, creativity develops another glimpse of life, previously unknown, perhaps, even to the person who manages to create it."

When I was growing up, Christians would be likely to associate conformity and keeping the rules with God, and they would view creativity with suspicion. That seems to be changing, a good example being our merging two Protestant denominations, and having a Jewish priest who is in a same sex marriage, something unthinkable a few decades ago. However, as John Dominic Crossan writes in one of his books, just as the daily newspapers change every day, the Good News needs to be constantly updated also. When the oral tradition of Jesus' sayings from the 20's were starting to be written down in the 50's and 60's, a lot had changed, so that by the time the Gospels were revised and put in their final form, the theology was updated to meet the needs of their current situation, and reflected the growing tension and final separation with the Jewish community. So the Gospels were creative documents, not set in stone, addressing the confusion of why the delay in the return of Jesus on the clouds, rethinking The Kingdom of God, seeing it as in our hearts as well as in the world, and searching the Jewish

scriptures for fore shadowing of the death and resurrection of Jesus. I think a lot of believers have tended to assume God was dictating the words in the writer's ears to leave no room for human error, which is what I was taught, rather than allowing for different levels of inspiration for the varieties of views that came to make up both the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Testament.

Jesus preaching of the Kingdom of God often featured banquets and inclusive seating at the table, and declared there was plenty for all, a vision the early church carried on, as described in our reading from Acts. Everyone was of one mind and heart and shared their possessions with the needy. However, as Crossan writes in his new book *How to Read the Bible & Still be a Christian: Struggling with Divine Violence from Genesis Through Revelation*, The radical ideas of God were always eventually toned down by communities who found it made life easier to adjust back to the normalcy of empire's oppression. In the Gospels, Jesus is made to pronounce God's judgement and punishment on the Jews, while the Roman Empire which destroyed Jerusalem, the temple, and killed up to a million people in the Jewish Rebellion of 66-70, is portrayed as relatively benign. Likewise, Paul's seven authentic letters proclaim equality for race and gender, and Christians freeing their slaves, while the later six epistles, which are almost certainly not by him, reassert male superiority over women, tell women to be silent in church, and assumes Christians own slaves. This indicates to me, that even as God did not spare his Son from death, he does allow his written word to express conflicting ideas, of unequal worth. Believers are oppressed and wounded when the normalcy of empire is not challenged by God's Kingdom when it infiltrates the church.

To paraphrase Paul, if Christ has not risen and given us the Spirit, which can heal our wounds, then we are just fooling ourselves and wasting our time. As a child, I didn't see life in the church, and I definitely thought I was wasting my time, but a day came when I was awakened by a spiritual energy so alive I didn't feel like I had been living before. This intensity didn't last, but it was a creative energy such as I had experienced in a

diminished way doing art, listening to music and reading great books. It took me a while to trust what I felt, because correct belief was emphasized over personal experience,

After a time of increasing internal pressure to work on my art and nurture my soul rather than my intellect, I finally paid attention to my inner needs. The creative work of making order out of chaos, creating intuitive images which were meaningful, and seemed to emerge from a consciousness greater than my own, became a form of prayer for me. When my mother's death triggered a release from my subconscious depths that nearly overwhelmed me with repressed emotions and rage, as well as a deep spiritual pain, I found that I could articulate with my images, things I felt but could not put into words and that these pictures were healing these wounds. I have been working on this for twenty five years now, and I have explored a lot of my inner terrain. I have wrestled with my shadow, explored numinous dreams, imagined healing encounters with my dead parents, discovered many strange and wonderful things, and have found that the inner world is an infinite space where there is no time. I have uncovered a lot of illusions about myself, and have broken through many false images of God. The gradual realization of God's greatness grows bigger and bigger, and the pattern of my life becomes clearer. The darkness is no longer a barrier of any kind, and the supposed chaos now seen to be a perfect order. My wounds, which once seemed to me to be beyond healing, are now only faint scars which served as occasions for growth and creativity, although every time I start to feel all my wounds are healed, more are revealed.

Thomas discovered that laying down conditions for God to meet is a mistake. We are so misled most of the time, and we underestimate God. God has already anticipated our deepest longings, and we are already part of the fellowship of the Father and the Son, if we would only believe it.