

3 Easter
April 18, 2021

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

The other night Caren and I were watching part of a National Geographic series about National Parks, and there was an episode focused on Yosemite in California, and the Giant Sequoia trees in Mariposa Grove ... some as tall as 300 feet. The documentary then abruptly turned away from the trees to a piece on a bobcat family. My first thought was this was a perfect example of not seeing the forest for the trees. The fact is that Mariposa Grove is part of a much larger ecosystem, and it seemed a missed opportunity to address the place of these Giant Sequoias in the larger scheme of things.

I start my sermon this morning with that anecdote because I believe that we often don't see the forest because of the trees in front of us ... in this particular case, the Bible stories about the Resurrection.

This morning's reading from Luke's gospel is similar to last week's reading from John's gospel about Doubting Thomas. The disciples are gathered together in a room and the resurrected Jesus appears to them. He shows them the holes in his hands and feet. But, this week, like last week, there are doubts. Jesus asks, "Why do doubts arise in your hearts?" The author of Luke's gospel goes on "While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, [Jesus] said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence."

For me this raises the question ... what prompted these stories to be written so graphically? Why did both of the authors of Luke and John feel it necessary to point out that the resurrected Jesus had a body they could touch ... and he could actually eat fish? It sounds to me as if there were those in the greater community that had doubts about the story of a physical resurrection, so Luke and John included this testimony to allay their disbelief.

This, of course, has evolved into a present-day litmus test for who is a REAL Christian. Do you believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus, or not? For some people, if this is just some kind of metaphor, or allegorical story, or if you believe that the disciples were actually seeing an apparition ... a ghost ... then you are not a TRUE Christian. In this case, one could believe everything else in the Bible, but fail to pass the "faith test," and therefore be labeled a heretic. The focus in this case becomes a belief in the physical resurrection of Jesus. It is a wonderful tree to look at, but I think it missed the context of the surrounding faith the Resurrection points to.

In this Easter season ... the Season of the Resurrection ... I believe this misses the mark. The Resurrection is about New Life ... New Life after death. The Resurrection is NOT about whether or not one believes Jesus came back to life in a physical body. The Resurrection is about the larger faith ecosystem of the story about Jesus. Jesus lived ... he healed ... he taught ... and his teachings brought him into conflict with the Roman authorities and the Temple hierarchy. Why? Because Jesus taught a nonviolent way of life in the midst of a world dependent upon power, might, and violence to enforce authority.

I don't want to get distracted by the skepticism that may have prompted these stories we hear in Luke's and John's gospels. However, I can make a good case for skepticism. These stories of encounters with Jesus are a little dubious after all. Yes, the disciples had heard that the women had seen the risen Jesus, but for Jesus to appear to the disciples in a locked room, as if he could just walk through the wall as we heard in the story last week, was just a little over the top. Then this week he eats a piece of fish. Maybe the disciples had seen an apparition ... isn't that what they had said when the women had told them they had seen Jesus on the path? It doesn't surprise me that when others heard these stories they, too, were skeptical.

But does disbelief mean that one doesn't have faith? For that matter, can a skeptic in any age, including our own, still find a place within the body of the faithful? I sometimes think of myself as a skeptic, yet I also know that my skepticism has led me to curiosity ... and my curiosity has led to me to inquisitive exploration ... and that exploration has only deepened my faith.

The Greek words that are translated as "belief" and "faith" have the same root, but they are used in different ways. When Jesus encounters the paralyzed man who is lowered through the roof, or the woman who had bleeding for 12 years, or blind Bartimaeus, or the woman of the city he tells them that their "faith" has "saved" them, or made them "well," or made them "whole." It is never perfectly clear what Jesus means by "faith" but it has something to do with trusting God.

On the other hand, the doubt of the disciples and others has to do with what seems to be an acceptance as objective reality of an incredulous claim. Feeding five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish is an incredulous claim. Raising Lazarus from the grave after four days is an incredulous claim. Walking on water is an incredulous claim. Rising from the dead and appearing to the disciples in a locked room is an incredulous claim. So, in this scientific age CAN people have doubts about these claims in our Holy Scripture and still have faith?

My answer is YES! I'm not going to try to explain away these stories. I embrace them as "true" ... even if they are not necessarily factual. Could you have video taped these events? I don't think so. Do they report a reality experienced by the people who were witnesses? I'm sure of it. If that sounds contradictory, it is. However, I believe that the truth is written between the lines as well as in black and white. Is there room for the faithful skeptic in the church community today? Yes, just as there was room for doubters amongst the disciples.

I don't want to get caught up looking just at trees, when it is the forest ... the greater ecosystem ... that really has something to teach me. We tend to look at Christianity as being monolithic ... that every expression of the Christian faith is basically the same with maybe a few wrinkles here and there. However, that is far from the truth. We ... in Western Christianity ... that is, Christianity based out of the Roman Catholic Church ... look at the Resurrection as about Jesus ... and Jesus alone ... being given new life by God.

However, the Eastern Christian Churches ... Eastern Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox ... those Christian Churches that look to Constantinople for their spiritual heritage ... see the Resurrection as applying to ALL human beings ... PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

Noted New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, is the author of "Resurrecting Jesus." It is the culmination of 15 years of research of frescos and icons from the very early church. It seems that the churches in the East see the Resurrection differently than the churches in the West. And, Easter in the Eastern Orthodox Church is determined by the Julian Calendar, and therefore will be for them May 2 of this year.

Now, I know that a number of you live on Anastasia Island. The word "anastasia" is a Greek word ... it means resurrection. In these fresco that Crossan examined ... in Greece and Turkey and the settlements of the early church ... many had the label "Anastasia" written in Greek across the top. The scene below the title was the resurrected Jesus with his hand holding the wrist of a man rising out of a sarcophagus ... a casket. In many of the frescos there was a women standing behind the man. The man Jesus is lifting up is Adam ... the woman is Eve ... and they represent all of humanity from the beginning of time.

Also, in many of these frescos Jesus is seen standing on iron gates that have been torn off their hinges ... there are locks and metal parts on the ground, and is depicted a great fissure in the earth. These are all symbols of Hades, and Jesus standing on the gates of Hades releasing all those imprisoned there.

The symbolism was not that Jesus rose from the grave alone ... rather the symbolism is that all humanity rose from death to New Life along with Jesus in his resurrection. Jesus' resurrection had opened the possibility that all humanity PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE ... could overcome the death that holds them, and rise to New Life.

As an aside, we have a wonderful example of the two expressions of the Christian faith right here in St. Augustine. St. Photios Greek Orthodox National Shrine on St. George Street is not just another tourist attraction. It is a museum and shrine to the first Greeks to immigrate to this country in 1768, and I encourage you to visit it if you haven't already. In St. Photios Shrine there is chapel, and in one of the apses ... a side room of the chapel ... is a fresco just like the one I just described ... the Resurrected Jesus is lifting Adam from the grave, and standing on the gates to Hades. Now, this is just down the street from the Roman Catholic Basilica. These two expressions of the Resurrection that started side-by-side two thousand years ago are still side-by-side. There is more than one way to understand our faith. This is part of the forest in which the trees exist,

Believing in the Resurrection of Jesus the Christ is not just about whether one can accept the testimony that Jesus met with his disciples, and that the disciples could touch his body, and the resurrected Jesus could eat fish. For me the Resurrection is about New Life ... not a rerun of old life ... but a new way of being ... and a new way of being that transforms the world ... my world and the world out there.

The Resurrection is understood in different ways by different people ... and by different expression of our Christian faith. One is not RIGHT and the other WRONG ... they can all stand together in a tension that makes up the forest of our faith. And ... remember ... there is room for skepticism in our faith.

So, what are your doubts? Of what are you skeptical? How has your disbelief caused you to be curious, and therefore driven you to explore your faith? What questions do you still harbor that cause you to wonder? What questions do you have that you may be afraid to voice? To what questions do you want clear answers rather than live in the discomfort ... the tension ... of not knowing? And finally, how have you not seen, yet still have faith on your journey?

Yes, there are some religions ... even expressions of Christianity ... that have all the answers, yet they don't allow any questions. In some expressions of our own faith, there is no room for questions, much less doubt. However, I find my curiosity, and the curiosity of others, to drive an exploration that deepens my faith. I encourage you to use your questions ... and doubts ... to do the same.

I want to close with a reflection about John Dominic Crossan's understanding of all this. He makes a good case for the fact that the civilization we know today began when nomadic tribe peoples began to settle down ... a change from shepherds to farmers ... the change embodied in the story of Cain and Able. With that change came the need to protect territory ... and a justification for violence.

In Crossan's words,

"In the crucifixion story, what we have is a parable against civilization. The kingdom of Rome is a typical kingdom within the normal protocol of this world and, as such, it is based upon violent force and imperial coercion. It is simply the normalcy of the civilization in the Mediterranean place and first-century time. But the kingdom of God is an antitypical kingdom in that it does not even allow violent "fighting" to free Jesus from execution. So the Crucifixion and Resurrection story is not simply about Jesus clashing with or triumphing over Pilate, but about a hopeful option to humanity to find a way out of the violence-based civilization it has created for itself."

In light of the recent spate of mass shootings in this nation, this couldn't be more true.

Amen.