

Sermon for April 30, 2006  
Third Sunday of Easter

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“Touch Me and See”

In the last chapter of the gospel of Luke the resurrected Jesus appears three times. The first time was at the tomb to Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told it to the apostles; but the words to them seemed like an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

That same day two disciples were on the road to Emmaus, a village just outside of Jerusalem. After a long visit when they broke bread together their eyes were opened and they recognized Jesus. “And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them...Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he was known to them in the breaking of the bread.”

We can only begin to imagine how frightened the disciples must have been. Would someone find them and identify them as followers of Jesus. Would they be publicly humiliated, tortured and crucified? Their world was a very frightening place.

And here we pick up today’s story: “As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them ‘Peace be with you. They were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.”

As we listen to this story, now two thousand years later, the world is still a very frightening place. We too need to hear Jesus say to us, “Peace be with you”, to turn our fear into faith and our apathy and despair into hope for the world.

Today our Church School is celebrating earth week. The world is a wonderful place. God’s creation is especially magnificent this time of year. As people of God we are reminded today in the gospel that we celebrate the earth as our home, not as a half-way station to heaven.

Because we have forgotten who we are, even as God’s people, we have made the earth a very frightening place. For example, “Climate change is rapidly becoming the most serious threat to the planet’s biodiversity”, said Jay Malcolm forestry professor at the University of Toronto. “This study provides even stronger scientific evidence that global warming will result in catastrophic species loss across the planet.” ... Scientists predict that a quarter of the world’s plant and vertebrate species will face extinction by 2050.”

To respond to the disciples’ fear and ours Jesus came to them in the flesh. “He said to them, ‘Why are you so frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see I have.”

Jesus calls attention to his hands and feet in order to prove that the person they see before them is a genuine human being. Luke writes these words to challenge false teachers who said he was not a real human being. Luke says that he was not just any person, he was the resurrected messiah.

From the very beginning the church has struggled to understand Jesus as both fully human and fully divine. In the early church there was a great deal of controversy. In this month's National Geographic there is a featured article on an ancient writing found in Egypt, "The Gospel of Judas". It was one of a number of Gnostic gospels not included in the bible.

"The word gnosis means 'knowledge' in Greek. The Gnostics believed that there is an ultimate source of goodness, which they thought of as the divine mind, outside of the physical universe. Humans carry a spark of that divine power, but they are cut off by the material world all around them, a flawed world, as the Gnostics saw it, the work of an inferior creator rather than the ultimate God... Salvation lay in awakening that divine spark within the human spirit and reconnecting with the divine mind. Doing so required the guidance of a teacher, and that, according to the Gnostics, was Christ's role. Those who grasped his message could be come as divine as Christ himself."

In the actual Gospel of Judas Jesus says to Judas, "You will exceed all of them. For you will sacrifice the man that clothes me." Judas would be the one to help Jesus to die on a cross so that his true divine spirit could be released from his evil body that clothed him.

I took classes on the Gnostics at the seminary because it is important to know, not only what they teach, but the influence of their teachings on Christianity. Gnosticism is actually an ancient religion that is centuries older than Christianity. It has been a sort of religious parasite that has attached itself to a variety of religions trying to extract the life out of each one by infusing its own teaching.

At various times Christianity has adopted Gnostic teachings. Christians have sometimes taught that the world is not a good place. It is a frightening place. They have believed in a god who will not get them out of this world in the end unless they offer the right sacrifices, do the right things and believe the only right and true way. They believe that after death their souls are released from their evil bodies. In the Apostle's creed we confess that we believe in the resurrection of the body.

In our gospel story, instead of saying the world is bad and flesh is bad, Jesus came in flesh and bones. And he touched them. Instead of bringing divine judgment, he brought God's love and compassion. Jesus came to share their fellowship, not to destroy them in judgment.

"While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering he said to them, 'have you anything to eat?' They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence." In eating with them, Jesus celebrated their humanity. They shared the goodness of food and the joy of godly fellowship. The gospel, the good news that Jesus shared with them is that it is good to be human beings, it is good to live within our skin.

In this story and the whole New Testament we receive the strong message that isolating people from their identity as creatures of God and from the rest of creation is the greatest violation of the Christian faith. It is refusing to be who God intends us to be.

“Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses to these things.’”

Jurgten Moltman writes: “Every glance at the creation stories in the Old Testament makes it clear first of all that human beings are creatures among other creatures. There is a fellowship of creation and human beings are members of it.”

When the resurrected Jesus appears to us in the flesh he affirms our humanity, he lifts us from being something less than human to our full dignity as people. Our sin as creatures has been to live as though we are above the rest of creation, instead of being part of it. Our sin is treating the creation as ours instead of God’s. The evidence is right in front of us. We are living in such a way that our lifestyles are more important than the existence of over a quarter of our fellow creatures that will become extinct in fifty years unless our minds are opened to once again understand God’s scriptures, God’s purpose for us and for the whole world.

Jesus’ physical presence fulfills God’s hope for us. By his example on a cross we see that those who perpetuate violence will not have the last word. Jesus’ cross is God’s way and our way into the world and all of its pain and suffering. By the grace of God Jesus touches us, restoring life, filling us with joy as we learn that living within our own skin is really as good as it can possibly get.

From our lesson today and during this earth week we are reminded that God created us to care for the earth, including one another. God’s earth is good and life-giving. God’s earth sustains our lives. It is filled with awe and wonder and beauty, even if the beauty can sometimes be terrible beauty. When we understand God and the world the way Jesus has shown us, in the flesh, we are led to a radical trust in God. We are no longer afraid to embody God’s presence in the world. Jesus has made us God’s people. Jesus gave us our lives back.

To illustrate the ongoing struggle C.S. Lewis, in his classic work “The Screwtape Letters”, depicts an elderly devil counseling a younger devil who has just set out to secure the damnation of a young Christian man. This will require defeating the enemy, God. Screwtape describes what they are up against.

“To anticipate the Enemy’s strategy, we must consider God’s aims. The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more or less or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another. The

Enemy wants him, in the end, so free from any bias in his own favor that he can rejoice in his own talents as frankly and gratefully as in his neighbor's talents – or in a sunrise, an elephant, or a waterfall. He wants each person, in the long run, to be able to recognize all creatures ( even himself) as glorious and excellent things. He wants to kill their self-love as soon as possible; but it is his long-term policy, I fear, to restore to them a new kind of self-love - a charity and gratitude for all selves, including their own; when they have really learned to love their neighbors as themselves, they will be allowed to love themselves as their neighbors. For we must never forget what is the most repellent and inexplicable trait in our Enemy, He really loves the hairless bipeds. He has created and always gives back to them with His right hand what He has taken away with His left.”

In coming to us resurrected in the flesh, saying “touch me and see”, this is what God has done. God has given us our lives back as human beings. God has done that for the sake of the whole creation. AMEN!