

The Preaching of the Word at Williamsburg Presbyterian Church

215 Richmond Road, Williamsburg, Virginia 23185-3534

“Five Easter Stories” The Gospel according to John 20

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2010

Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! We say that every Easter. It gets to the heart of the matter. We have more to say, but that starts us on the way: Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!

We try out these words and test pronouncing them aloud because so much threatens to shout them down. Death seems so inevitable and rising again seems so improbable. How can this good news be true? Could anything possibly be more out of fashion than good news and words of hope?

We wonder about this message: what it means, what difference it might make and how can we know, really know it. We come here on Easter wondering and wanting to know. We are not the first people to do so.

The Apostle Paul, that anomalous character who preached Christ all over the Mediterranean world, something like twenty five years after whatever it was that happened to him on the Damascus road and after all that travel, wrote to the Philippians: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Phil 3:10)

We expect Paul to say something like, “Let me tell you all about Christ and the power of his resurrection,” but no: “I *want to know* Christ and the power of his resurrection.” That calls us here: we want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. We have heard before; we want to hear again; we want to touch that power, that energy, that life—or rather be touched by it.

We come once more to hear the Easter story, but reading the Gospel of John, we don’t just get an Easter story, we get a bunch of Easter stories, five different stories with different characters and different ways of coming to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

The first story stars “the beloved disciple” with Peter as supporting cast. This “beloved disciple” is one of the mysteries of John’s gospel. He is never named. Some think it is John himself, others think not. John calls him: “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved.” This “other disciple” and Peter race to the tomb Easter morning. They had heard from Mary Magdalene the tomb had been tampered with. Surely they feared the worst. The disciple whom Jesus loved arrives first but stands at the opening of the tomb and does not go in. Peter arrives and goes in. They see the linen wrappings that had enclosed the body of Jesus but no body was there. Nobody was there: Jesus did not appear; no angel fresh from heaven to explain what had happened. It was empty and cold

and discouraging with not a sign of life but when “the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved” went into the tomb, John tells us, “he saw and believed.”

What he saw we cannot guess and what he believed we do not know, but he believed and trusted what was happening. How this happens we are not told, but some people are like that. He gets it—he believes—not because he loved Jesus so much but because Jesus loved him, and Christ’s love overwhelms our not knowing and overcomes our hopelessness. Love has its own reasons and its own persuasion more compelling than any evidence that could be mustered. The disciple trusted that love more powerful than death. There are people who simply see and believe.

In the second story Mary Magdalene sees but does not recognize the risen Jesus. The disciples depart leaving Mary weeping outside the tomb. The Gospel of John does not tell us why she weeps but we know. Death provides plenty of reasons for tears. Someone you love dies and the tears come. Hearing of someone’s death miles away brings tears close. Hearing of someone’s death centuries past can cause tears in present tense, so it was last Sunday. Tears can blind us and vision blurs so we cannot recognize life, love and hope when we meet them face to face

As the years go by we lose so much and the losses build a monument of desolations so formidable we cannot see over it to make out a welcoming face and gentle embrace. Loss brings its own bitter tears concealing the new thing happening right in front of us.

Mary Magdalene must have wept tears of fear as well, shock from the terrible violence of Friday, terror of the dreadful things that this world can do to us, fear for what can happen to the people we love, and the horror that we cannot do anything—anything!—to prevent it.

Small wonder she could not recognize Jesus. There’s enough death and dread in this world to make us want to shut our eyes forever, enough to blur our vision to everything hopeful or encouraging or unexpected.

Mary can see but not recognize; her eyes are open but hazy with pain; she can see him but cannot know him, she thinks he’s the gardener— until he speaks her name: “Mary.” We wonder about these stories where people cannot recognize the risen Jesus in their midst. Jesus breaks through our not knowing speaking our name: “Mary”... “Dave”.... “Elizabeth” It’s in the name.

This is the way Jesus said it would be. He told his disciples, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.... I know my own and my own know me” (John 10:11, 13). Strange as it may sound, Jesus calls us by name. People are here today because they heard their name called and they recognized the risen Lord.

In the third story the disciples huddle in a house afraid. They came from Galilee following Jesus but now they are alone and afraid and don’t know where to go. When you don’t know where to go every place looks pretty much the same. The weekend has seeped out their energy. They sit in heaps around the house. Friendless, the world has turned against them. The locked doors signal their fear and were someone to knock or call out they would be too afraid to answer.

So Jesus simply walks into the midst of them. No, I don’t know how that happens—I can’t explain these stories except to say the risen Jesus is ever surprising and

unexpected and unbounded by the ordinary rules we use to keep things in their proper places. The door was “locked for fear,” John tells us and, “Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’”

The Apostle Paul spoke of “the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding” (Phil 4:18). Here the peace of God surpasses locked doors and trumps fear by offering something better. The Scriptures say “perfect love casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). Here perfect love not only casts out fear but fills fear’s terrible emptiness with peace and power.

Jesus breathes upon the disciples and says, “‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” At the beginning God’s breath moved over the waters of creation and God’s breath breathed life into the clay form of human being, and now Christ breathes resurrection life into people so that they can go and give God’s peace to others. With the gifts of his peace and his breath they “know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”

The fourth story tells not everyone was present that night. Thomas didn’t see the Lord, didn’t hear his blessing of peace, didn’t receive the breath of resurrection life, didn’t sense that surge of power they found. They told him, “We have seen the Lord,” and Thomas said, well, he’d like to see that himself. Thomas had heard all kinds of claims for all kinds of thing and knows how the slightest shred of hope spoken into the empty space of fear and loss can echo so loudly that it causes people to believe almost anything. Thomas will not had. He will see for himself; he will touch for himself. He knows Jesus, knows what happened to Jesus, knows the wounds, and if there are no wounds, no sign of suffering, then no Jesus. Thomas knows that pretty pretending and pious sentiments do nothing to alter sharp, painful facts like nails and thorns and spears.

A week later Thomas was there with the disciples and Jesus was there too—it seems characteristic of his risen life that he appears suddenly and unexpectedly—and he blesses Thomas, “Peace be with you,” and invites Thomas to survey the evidence.

Thomas is the patron saint for all of us who stand on this side of the Enlightenment and scientific revolution. Thomas is an empiricist who wants to run the tests and examine the data, but notice, please: Thomas is truly scientific. He does not predetermine the results of his investigation by judging beforehand what is possible. Thomas opens himself to the unexpected, he allows himself to be vulnerable to surprise and to learn, and examining the evidence his suspicions dissolve into the most exuberant and uncalculated affirmation of all: “My Lord and my God!”

Thomas has it right: God is the One who gives us life, God is the One who renews our lives, and God is the One who gives us trust “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.” Our coming “to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” is God’s work before it is our work. Faith is not our accomplishment, but God’s gift, and these stories announce that the life of the risen Christ will encounter us wherever we go and call us by name, our own name, and greet us with the peace and power of God.

I said five stories. The fifth story is your story, which is the story the Gospel of John is truly interested about. These other stories, John tells us, “these are written so that you may come to believe... that through believing you may have life in his name.”

Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! And because this is so, there is no end to the stories that will be told. You have your own story of unexpected meetings, of your

name being called, of power given to do God's work, of your own uncertainty transformed by Christ's presence.

Christ is risen! His story goes on and all the stories go on and on. John concludes his gospel to point to this truth: "There are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). So many stories! Yours is one of them. So many stories.

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