

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 19, 2009 Second Sunday of Easter

John 20:19-30

Crucified and Risen!

They've made it through Holy Week, through the terrible Friday of the crucifixion, the depressing Saturday, the bewildering Sunday when the women told them that they'd seen Jesus – alive!

And now the disciples are afraid and have locked themselves in a room. I wonder how long they have been there, and when they plan on returning to their ordinary lives. I always picture this room as hot and cramped, not unlike a tomb itself, a place that is no-place with mortal fear lurking just outside the door - friends are huddled together, paralyzed in their inactivity and hopelessness.

When, suddenly, Jesus is there. John doesn't tell us how he entered; he is simply there. And the disciples must not have recognized him, because he needs to identify himself by showing them his wounded hands and side.

This is a common thread through the resurrection stories: Jesus appears in the midst of those closest to him, the people who know and love him, and they do not recognize him. Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener until he calls her by name. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus do not recognize the risen Christ until the end of the journey, when they share a meal with him. Only belatedly do Peter and John realize that the stranger on the shore, directing them to an astonishing catch of fish, is their teacher.

And as we heard, Thomas was not with the disciples in that closed-up room. Later, when his friends told him, "We have seen the Lord," he refused to believe his eyes alone and demanded to touch Christ's wounded body. Jesus responds by inviting him, "put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side."

I wonder if Jesus says this to assure them that they are in the presence of Christ - not some ghost or imposter, but their friend and teacher. And by doing this, Jesus is inviting them and us into ever greater intimacy with him.

I mean, it's one thing to show someone your scars, and another thing to invite them to touch them!

This is a powerful invitation to come close and to experience his physical presence, his physical realness. He is saying, "Look closely. Be at home with me. Don't be afraid to touch me - you won't hurt or nor offend me."

Similarly, Jesus greets our fear and disbelief with loving acceptance, assuring us that he doesn't mind our questions and our probing. This gospel is no ghost story, no holy twilight zone divorced from physical reality or from everydayness. It is an invitation to come close, close enough to see the wounds and feel his risen presence.

Jesus' appearance in the midst of his frightened friends is another story of his incarnation, another reminder that God came and comes among us, experiencing and loving our humanity. We are aware of this at Christmas, when we hear that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth."

The churches fill, and believers and nonbelievers alike are drawn instinctively by the powerful image of God coming among us in the perfection, loveliness and vulnerability of a baby.

But Good Friday is about the incarnation as well. Jesus on the cross is an icon of suffering, a powerful statement about the flesh and particularly about its terrible vulnerability. His Passion reminds us of our almost infinite capacity to inflict and suffer hurt.

Then, Easter comes - a real relief from the uncomfortable physicalness of Good Friday. The resurrection can be a pleasant abstraction: we can surround ourselves with lilies and joyous music as we distance ourselves from his broken body. But the risen Christ did not appear to his followers in dreams or visions: he came among them in the homeliness and everydayness of shared walks and meals.

And he came to them - wounded. The disciples therefore were "filled with joy" as they grasped that he who stood before them was their own Master, alive from the dead.

The revelation of the wounds of Jesus after the resurrection was his way of letting the disciples realize that it was he himself, their crucified Lord who stood before them. He showed them his wounds for their sake - to help them believe in him.

It's as if God were saying, "I understand that you will doubt and struggle to believe in me and my son, so I will do everything I can to help you believe."

So what does it mean that our risen Lord is the crucified Lord? How do we understand the resurrection in light of this?

For one thing, it means that the resurrection is not just a magical fix to an awful situation. It is not merely a good ending tacked on to a tragic story by the gospel writers. The resurrected Christ is not the product of the disciples' overheated imagination. He is not ghost, no apparition.

The resurrection doesn't erase the crucifixion as if it never happened. Resurrection overcomes crucifixion. Life overcomes death. Joy prevails rather than despair.

That the risen Christ is our crucified Lord means that our hope is not in an abstraction, an idea, or a dream. Our hope is grounded in the reality of Jesus fulfilling his promise that on the third day he would rise again.

Twenty-five years ago my Uncle lost his wife to a painful, violent death. His grief is no doubt deep and complicated. Many years later, he shared with me the one thing that was still unresolved for him. He wondered, since her death was so physically painful, if she was still in pain in heaven.

The risen Christ, our crucified Lord says to my Uncle and to us all, "I have overcome your pain. See my wounds. Believe in me."

The resurrection is a complete resurrection. Not simply a restoring of the mind or the soul or the spirit, but a full resurrection of the body.

How can we understand this today? Perhaps I'm skating on thin ice to use a Star Trek analogy, but bear with me. You know how they beam people from the Enterprise to other places. Their bodies dissolve and then they fully reappear somewhere else.

Maybe it's something like that. So Jesus dies on the cross - and then returns to the disciples - completely - crucified body and all.

But as with all analogies, this one breaks down and falls short. For an analogy is just that - an analogy. It is not the substance of nor a substitute for the faith.

For we know that with the resurrection the disciples did not recognize Jesus right away. He spoke with them, he ate with them, he invited them to touch and then they believed.

No analogy, no explanation will answer the question, "how did the resurrection happen?"

We need to ask a different question: "What does this mean for us today?"

Let me offer this. Jesus still comes in everydayness. He still says: see my hands and my feet. Don't avert your eyes from my wounds out of politeness or disgust. Look at them. Put your finger here. Don't be afraid. Remember the incarnation. I came among you first in human flesh - flesh that can be hungry and fed, flesh that can be hurt, even killed. Flesh that can embody God's love.

He comes among us still - mediated through human flesh. We would do well to gather our memories and build our futures around things we can touch, especially baptismal water and the bread and wine of the Easter meal. These sustain us as we journey, filled with joy, hand in hand, with the whole company of the faithful toward the eternal Easter yet to come.

Amen.