

Resurrection

We Episcopalians are an accepting lot, by and large, some even say notoriously accepting. We're loath to throw people out of the church just because they don't believe exactly everything that our official creeds state or act as we think they should. We are more aware of the frailty of human nature than many other churches and more willing to live with the ambiguity.

For example, I have a friend who doesn't believe in the resurrection, either of Jesus or anyone else, in any sense whatever – neither physical, spiritual, mystical, nor anything else that may be recognized as resurrection. Yet he is a far better Christian and Episcopalian than I am, far more concerned with and working for the weak and defenseless of the world. Our friendship, including many spiritual values, continues fast. No one would think of excluding him from our church fellowship – he is a devoted every-Sunday worshiper of God on high. Our church and his parish leave whatever the situation requires to God, trusting in God's love, mercy, and good will. Actually, he and I take a great deal of pleasure in some spirited email debates, for I am a firm, orthodox believer in resurrection, Jesus' and our own, though I am a bit hesitant to define precisely *how* that happens. I know *why* it happens, however: the immense, immeasurable, immemorial, even implacable love of God. Because love is at the core of God's nature, God loves us with an almost frightening love. God will not live in eternity without us. We're not anywhere close to being equal with God, of course, so we have nothing to offer Him that She doesn't already have. But I suppose it's a bit like me and my dogs: we're not equals, I love them dearly, and I don't want to live in eternity without them. I've already put God on notice that if dogs don't go to heaven, I want to go wherever they go. I suspect that God loves us with a greater love than my love for my dogs.

Yet for all our acceptance of people who do not exactly fit our moral, creedal, intellectual, emotional, social, or economic norms – for all that, our Church does have those norms, we do have standards of moral behavior, we do have beliefs about the nature of life here and hereafter, we do have challenges that we think every human being must meet and, with God's help and mercy, grow through. We're in the business of helping one another do precisely that. Some are more successful than others. It matters not. We're all in the same boat, we all fall short of what God wants us to be, we are all the unavoidable targets of God's love and good will, we all are destined to live forever with God and with one another in a loving community that is only hinted at here.

My reflections today on resurrection are prompted, of course, by the fact that this is the Easter season for the church, the fifty days after the first day of the resurrection of Jesus. Today's gospel reading (Luke 24.36-48) is one of the accounts of Jesus appearing to His

disciples after His resurrection. They are startled, frightened, disbelieving. They know something new is happening, but at first they interpret that as negative and dreadful, the appearance of a ghost with an unknown and therefore frightening agenda.

Jesus teaches them a new way to look at life after death. It is real and it is good; it continues the identity we have grown into on earth, it is somehow different and better than what we have known, and it is open to growth and development that we can scarcely imagine.

The gospel writers are at pains to show that Jesus' resurrection is a real event, not a metaphor. We have trouble wrapping our minds around what life after death might mean, but the gospel writers are insistent that the first disciples, up to five hundred people, saw Jesus in His resurrected state. Moreover, that resurrected state includes what we have been; Jesus shows them His scarred hands, feet, and side. This living body is the one that died a tortured death upon the cross. Yet the wounds are no longer wounds, but scars; the suffering is over; what is won through suffering is what lasts. There is that homely touch of eating a fish to prove that He does indeed have a real body, bones and flesh and blood. Last week we heard John's gospel tell us of Thomas putting his finger into the Lord's scars; these are real, not metaphoric. John's gospel also tells a resurrection story of Jesus eating a breakfast meal with His friends back in Galilee, a breakfast that demonstrated steadfast forgiveness of the past and unalloyed love for the future.

These are the narratives that my Episcopal, unorthodox friend must ignore or explain away in order to deny resurrection. If my friend denies the truth (in some fashion) of these accounts, why would he give credence to anything else in the story of Jesus? Paul of Tarsus had it right when he wrote in his letter to the church at Corinth that if the resurrection of Jesus didn't happen in a real sense, Christians are the most pitiable people in the world. (1 Corinthians 15) Several passages in the New Testament show that my friend's skepticism is not something new, but that people had difficulty from the beginning believing such good news. Skepticism about resurrection is not some modern, sophisticated rejection of old superstition; it is the same human weakness that manifested itself in our church community from the beginning.

Why should we believe in the resurrection of Jesus and of one another? The first reason is to give due weight to those five hundred who said that they saw Him after His death. But that is not the only reason. Once we have been exposed to the narrative of God's impassioned love for Her creation in the story of Jesus and His followers, we are challenged to find evidence of that love in our own lives and in our own broken but redeemed world. Amidst that brokenness – abused children and women, disease, war, death of youth, hatred, climate changing, famine, leaking planets (see last week's sermon) – amidst all this hurt, there is also evidence of phenomenal love. I leave you to count your own blessings as the evidence. I don't know why God allows the hurtful stuff to continue any more than I understand why God volunteered to share our life and our death.

But I am able to bear the hurt because of the healing of everything that resurrection promises and delivers.

So if you think of yourself as a little bit strange in your beliefs, know that you are in good company. Know that this church has room for you. Know that God's promises and activities bring us more than our imaginations and our intellects can comprehend. Know that resurrection in all its forms is yours and well as Jesus'. The Lord is risen, the Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.