

## Proving the Resurrection

Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!

A few years ago, around this time of year, I received a letter from a young woman, a college student. This young woman—let's call her Amy—had been a teenager in a church where I once served. She recounted in the letter how a few months before Easter two years before, her mother died, and when Easter came around Amy just couldn't bring herself to attend services, or even get out of bed. This year she did make it to church, but, she explained "I wasn't ready for the emotion I felt. During the first song I kept thinking, 'I'm in church. Singing that Jesus conquered the grave and all I can think is 'he's still dead.' He's not here and neither is Momma. I want to cry.'" Holy Week, Amy said, she understands, but not Easter: "I love Maundy Thursday: service, love, community, remembrance, all of this sits well with me, resonates with me. Good Friday, the journey to the cross, the sacrifice, the uncertainty, the anger, the sin, the doubt, the heartbreak, the despair. All this too, informs my faith. Even Holy Saturday, with the vigil, the waiting, the tomb, the eleventh hour, the stillness, the dark. This, my experience of grief, says is real; it is honest and part of my story." But not so for Easter: "For me Christ is still gone. Where is Christ in this broken world, in my broken soul?... Where is this risen Christ? The crucified Christ I see, but the risen Christ is beyond my perception." What can we say to this young woman? How is Christ present now, some two thousand years after he died?

If Christ has been raised, where is he? Amy is certainly not alone in struggling to make sense of Easter. Countless others throughout the ages have wrestled with the same questions Amy asked. Perhaps some of you here today have asked these questions or something like them. Perhaps, like Amy, you consider yourself more of a "Good Friday Christian" than an "Easter Sunday Christian" and you struggle each year to muster up enough "Easter joy" to make it through the season.

If so, you are in good company. The first disciples struggled to make sense of Easter too. Indeed, if we are to believe the witness of our gospel lesson today, the disciples' experience of the first Easter was a lot more like Amy's than the trumpeted, pastel-colored, flower-bedecked pageant that we are accustomed to.

Looking at how the disciples spent the first Easter, it's difficult to see how Christianity ever got off the ground. Three days after Jesus died, things could hardly have seemed worse for Jesus' followers. There they were, huddled together in fear and confusion, not knowing where to turn or what to do next. Their leader and teacher, the one who had held them together all these long months, was now dead and buried—executed like a common criminal, and lying in a tomb, or so they thought. They were sure that Jesus, their leader, was the Messiah, the anointed one, the one God chose to restore the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus was dead now, and so were their dreams of restoration. Buried with Jesus in that tomb were all their hopes, their vision, their sense of direction and purpose in life.

All that remained was an overwhelming sense of failure and loss and shame, for having deserted Jesus in his hour of need. They were to be the ones walking confidently out into the world, announcing the inbreaking of God's kingdom. But look at them now— cowering like frightened rabbits behind locked doors, hoping that nobody in town will know that they're there. But then, one of the women, Mary Magdalene, came saying things that didn't make sense - that she had actually seen Jesus and had talked with him, that Jesus was alive, that he had risen from the dead just as he had promised. Could this be true? How could it? They didn't believe Mary's words, of course. She was "only a woman," and, well, you know "how women are." "Women aren't rational thinkers."

So the men stayed put and waited to see what would happen next. And then, suddenly, astonishingly, here he was, right there, in their midst, right there, before their very eyes. Jesus was alive. Now don't you think that maybe just for a moment some of the disciples might have been a little bit afraid that this was not all good news, that Jesus, understandably, might be angry with them for abandoning him? The disciples were just waiting for him to lay into them: 'Where were you guys? I had a fairly good view from where I was up there on the cross. I saw the soldiers, I saw my mother Mary and the other women, but I didn't see you! What happened to all that 'Jesus, we'll stick with you even to death' that you said earlier? Where were you when I needed you? Why did you run out on me? Peter, you especially. While you were warming yourself by the fire, I was getting raked over the coals by the religious authorities. I picked you out to be the leader; yet you acted like you never knew me--three times!"

But that's not what Jesus said. There were no recriminations, no anger, no condemnation or judgment, not even an expression of disappointment and hurt. No, Jesus appears among the disheartened, pitiful disciples and says simply, "Peace!" He knew what was in their hearts; he knew why they had barred the door. He knew they weren't "re-grouping," getting it together and deciding on their next move. No, they were scared and they were hiding out.

So, Jesus comes, bringing with him no hint of anger, no accusations, no trouble or turmoil—only peace. And, having shared his peace, Jesus then does what he came there to do. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says and he breathes on them, breathes the Spirit into them. Just as God breathed life into the first human in the creation story, here Jesus breathes new life into his disciples, re-creating this sorry bunch of cringing followers, giving them new life, new power, new boldness to share the Good News with the world: "As the Father has sent me," he says, "so I send you." Jesus has borne the good news as far as he can take it by himself, now it's the disciples' turn. Now they are to carry the message, under the power of his Spirit.

It's a lot to take in, for us as well as the disciples. But Jesus isn't done yet. Right away Jesus starts talking again, talking about that thing that's more difficult to talk about in the church than sex or even money— that is, forgiveness. "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." You'll recall, how one of the last things Jesus says from the cross was, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." And now after he was raised from the dead, what is the first thing Jesus does? As we just heard, he forgives; he declares peace to those who let him down.

And he does it before any of them ask for it. Right away, we see how Jesus' understanding of forgiveness is at odds with the way we think of forgiveness. For us, if we forgive at all, it is a second-order affair. First, let the offender ask for forgiveness, say they're sorry, truly sorry, then we'll forgive. Once, in a former congregation, a woman, whose friend had repeatedly stolen from her, said to me, "I've prayed to God for the strength to be able to forgive her." To which I replied, in my infinite pastoral wisdom, "No. First you tell her that she is wrong, that if she steals from you again, you are going to call the cops, have her thrown in jail, and then, and only then, if she says she's sorry, then we'll talk about forgiveness." But with Jesus, the order is different. That night behind the locked doors, nobody asked to be forgiven. Nobody said, "I'm sorry," or "Oops, I guess we really let you down; please forgive us." Jesus took the initiative with, "Peace," just like from the cross he said, "Father, forgive."

This sequence only makes sense if we recognize that the goal of forgiveness is to restore relationship. When the Risen Christ said, "Peace be with you," he was restoring the disciples to fellowship with him. He didn't hold their faithlessness against them. Nor does he hold our faithlessness against us. God takes the initiative by forgiving us before we ask. As St. Paul says, "God demonstrates His love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."

No longer are we separated, alienated from God. Through Jesus' death and faith in his blood, our sin is forgiven. Before his death we were trapped by our sin, by our selfish, self-destructive habits and vices, by our ignorance, our selfishness. In Jesus' death, we are freed, released from sin's hold over us.

It is for this reason that Jesus came into the world, this was his mission—to forgive sin even before we ask. And we—his disciples—are to carry on that mission, by extending the same "preemptive forgiveness" that Jesus offered. Forgiveness then is not just something that Christians engage in from time to time, if we have the energy and inclination. Forgiveness is at the very heart of what it means to be a Christian.

You see, the God who found a way to make a way toward us is the God who expects us to find a way to make a way toward others. Forgiveness is not optional equipment for the Christian life, some work of super-saintliness that we engage in if we really want to be good. Forgiveness is the normal habit of the Christian life. We forgive because Christ forgives us. We cross no bridge to forgive someone who has wronged us that God has not already crossed in order to forgive us.

So what does all this have to say to Amy and others like her? A few things come to mind. First, we can affirm Amy's questions and her doubts. Even the disciples doubted, at least at first. When Mary Magdalene told them Jesus had risen, they didn't believe it.

This leads us to the second point—there is no way to convince others of the truth of the resurrection. No attempt to "prove" that Christ was raised will answer every question or assuage every doubt; no claim of indisputable "logic" will make the resurrection "make sense" any more than it does. For, the resurrection cannot be proved, only experienced. Indeed, it is not the absence of Jesus' body from the tomb, but his presence with his followers that shows the truth of the resurrection.

This brings us to the third point. The risen Christ, if he is present at all, is present in his Church, among his followers. There is no proof beyond the Church, the sheer fact that it exists, that we come together every Sunday, despite our differences, our hurts, our doubts, our sins, to worship God, to give thanks for the forgiveness we have through the cross, and to learn how to love and forgive each other as Christ loved and forgave us. For, it is Jesus' Spirit working among us, inspiring us to love and forgive, that "proves" that Jesus is not dead, but alive. When the Church shows itself to be spirit-filled, when we forgive as Jesus forgives, and love one another as Jesus loves, we fulfill our mission to witness God's love to the world. As the old song goes, "they will know we are Christians by our love, by our love."

And they will know Christ is risen by our love, by our love, too. Christians' love for one another is the greatest witness to the resurrection there is. So, we see, the only truthful answer we can give to Amy... is ourselves, a people who have been transformed by the resurrection, by the risen Christ, a people empowered to love and forgive as he did. We are God's answer for the Amys of the world and for each other as well. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Let us show him to the world. Amen.