



# SAINT LUKE'S

THE INCARNATION MATTERS

THE SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

YEAR A

ACTS 2:14A, 22-32

PSALM 16

1 PETER 1:3-9

JOHN 20:19-31

A SERMON BY THE REV. POSEY KRAKOWSKY

APRIL 23, 2017

Recently, my husband gave me a series of murder mystery books to read – I’m not a huge mystery fan, but I do like them when they are set in an interesting time period. This particular one is set in Tudor England – the protagonist works for Thomas Cromwell – or at least he will for the first two books. Cromwell is clearly about to have his downfall, and I’ll be curious to see what happens to the main character to after his patron loses his head. Because, clearly, he will survive – he has to. How else could the series go on? One of the lovely things about mystery stories is the sense of suspense that writers create to keep us interested. It is almost as if an author lays out a trail of breadcrumbs to encourage us to move on down the road. Once we reach the end, and the identity of the perpetrator is revealed, we often look back and chuckle over those clues – usually tiny details that were carefully placed just on the edge of our attention, along with a good dose of red herrings that are meant to distract us and lead us astray. When I was studying the gospel passage today, I couldn’t help but think about that trail of breadcrumbs – and how stories are structured to guide the readers in a particular direction. So looking at the passage about Thomas, or Doubting Thomas, as we are often fond of calling him, I wanted to see where and how this story is placed in the larger context of the Gospel of John.

Just before this passage, Mary has gone to the tomb and found it empty. Jesus has appeared to her, and she has mistaken him for the gardener. It is not until after Jesus has called her by name that she recognizes him. This isn’t a case of a quick glimpse of someone in a crowd – we can’t explain away her lack of recognition because she didn’t get a good look. Jesus is right there in front of her, and she doesn’t recognize him until he speaks. After

she does, Jesus asks her to stop holding on to him. Clearly, she has touched him. So, even her eyes and ears are not enough—she instinctively feels the need to establish physical contact.

A few lines later, when Jesus appears to the other disciples, he speaks to them and shows them his hands and his side in order for them to recognize him. They don't recognize him until they see the marks of his crucifixion. After this, Jesus breathes on them – again, as with Mary, the visual and verbal recognition is followed by an actual form of physical contact. And finally, comes the story of Thomas.

Thomas say: “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” What is Thomas asking for? He wants to feel, to touch. What did Mary need? What have the disciples experienced? Exactly what Thomas is requesting. And how does Jesus respond? He gives Thomas what he wants. “Put your fingers here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt, but believe.”

Three stories, all of which affirm the tactile, comforting, wonderful and necessary joy of being in the flesh. Because in our limited, all too human experience, what we can touch seems the most real to us. Jesus' actions affirm the importance of those experiences.

Three stories that tell us that our need to touch, to taste, to see, and to hear do not diminish us. They are simply signs of who we are. Markers of our

limitations and our boundaries. Our five senses are how we learn to know and understand.

Three stories in which every one of the people we are hearing about gets to have physical contact with Jesus. First Mary, with sound, sight and touch, then the disciples with sound, sight and breath. When a writer repeats the same motif three times in a row, it sends a very strong message. By the time we follow that trail of breadcrumbs to Thomas, John has spelled it out so clearly that he's almost banging us on the head. He wants to make sure we really hear him.

The flesh matters. Our humanity matters. The incarnation matters. The Risen Lord was not a ghost.

Jesus was made flesh, and he rose again as flesh. What greater affirmation of the sanctity of creation could there be? Jesus was fully human. God did not choose to become human on a whim. This earthly life matters. The story of Thomas is telling us that the experiences of the flesh are important. So important that God chose to share them. God clearly values creation very much indeed.

And then John's Gospel pivots, to speak directly to us.

“Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have yet come to believe.”

John is addressing the generations upon generations of Christians who will not have been present to have that physical, touching, seeing, hearing experience of the risen Christ. Given that John's gospel was probably written around 90 CE, those who wrote it were like us. They too had not had contact with the risen Lord. But they most probably spoke with those who had. And they wanted to keep the immediacy of those experiences alive.

Over 20 years ago, when I was living in an apartment in Riverdale in the Bronx, I was introduced one day to an older woman who also lived in the building. After a brief but normal exchange of names and pleasantries, she did something surprising. Without a word of preparation, she rolled up her sleeve and held her arm out for me to see. On it was a simple tattoo – a number. She was a Holocaust survivor. The number was her prison camp identification number. Neither of us said anything for a long while – but we looked at each other with understanding. There were no words that could have expressed what she was trying to convey. Her story was there – literally engraved in her very flesh. It was clearly vitally important for her to have younger people bear witness to it. In these harrowing days when we hear far too many Holocaust deniers speaking in public, pretending that the Holocaust did not happen, I can now tell this story to bear witness, first hand to the number in her flesh. This is a story I can tell my children and grandchildren. It's a story I can tell you. I saw that number on her arm. It is vitally important for her and for me that it not be forgotten.

So too was the story of the corporal reality of the risen Christ vitally important for the earliest Christians. It was their story. It is our story. They wanted to pass on the immediacy of that experience so that it might remain alive. So that it would feel vital now, today, in our flesh. When we Christians tell this story, we are reminding ourselves to value creation just as the creator does. That Jesus came back, in the flesh – not as a ghost. The resurrection doesn't mean that the created world is no longer important. The resurrection doesn't mean that our only focus now should be on what happens to us in the next life. On the contrary, our Christian calling asks us to be awake to the material as well as the spiritual. To recognize that the suffering and pain of others is not something that we can turn our eyes away from with the cheap excuse that “they will get their reward later, so it doesn't matter how they are treated now.”

It reminds us that we need to focus on what is vital and good, here and now. It reminds us to think about what we can do now, in this life, to make it better for others.

Did I have to be in a Nazi death camp myself to grasp the essence of my neighbor's experience? Not at all. The testimony of the number on her arm was enough.

Do I have to see and touch the risen Christ myself in order to believe that this created world is dearly beloved by God? Not at all: the witness of the earliest followers of Jesus is enough.

Every time we pray the Creed – and we cross ourselves at the words “the resurrection of the dead”, we are affirming the sacrality of our flesh. We are affirming with and through our bodies that Jesus was fully human and fully

divine. We are affirming that we are indeed, the body of Christ, here and now.

Let us pray:

O God, who by the glorious resurrection of your son Jesus Christ destroyed death, and brought life and immortality to light: Grant that we, being raised with him, may know the strength of his presence, and rejoice in his eternal glory; who with you and the Holy Spirit lives and reigns, one God, for ever and ever.

Amen

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