

Staying With The Strangeness

2nd Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020

It is the story of every human life. There is a beginning, and an end. We prefer to not think about it for as long as we can, but — intuitively — we know that life is always "hemmed in" by death from the very beginning. Whatever we believe about eternal life, we know that death "cancels out" this life — that we can't be both dead & alive at the same time, (*at least not in a literal sense.*) And so — whatever we believe about the resurrection — it's obvious to us (*at a very basic level*) that Jesus was either *dead* — or he was *alive* — because he couldn't be both. But if we look closely at the strange picture John paints of Jesus in this morning's gospel text, it's not quite that straightforward.

By nightfall, the apostles had locked themselves into their room — fearing death would come and violently take them — just as it had taken Jesus. So they were locking it out, as best they could. But even inside this refuge, they had no peace. Their fears of death remained and were rising. And, in the midst of all this — unhindered by their locks — Jesus appears inside the room and says to them "**Shalom**" — **Peace** be with you. (*Peace was definitely what they needed most... but how to find it?*)

The Jesus who appears to them is a Jesus they could not possibly have imagined. He is alive, showing the bright signs of life. He is walking & talking, and clearly "*has his wits about him.*" He's as wise & compassionate as ever. But he is **also** showing the signs of death. And they're not simply scars. The "marks" made by the nails are open enough to put your finger into. The "mark" made by the spear is wide enough to reach your whole hand into. **But notice:** there is no report that these are active wounds in need of treatment. No bleeding, or pain, or signs of infection. So we have to ask ourselves — **how can that be?**

If we don't immediately run off into religious speculation, or dismiss it as a miracle we can't hope to understand or experience ourselves, there is a simple answer to the question. A body that has such deep & deadly "marks" in it — but isn't bleeding, in pain, or showing signs of infection — is a dead body.

But we don't stop at that point, and "shut down," as though the story were over. It's just getting started. Because, strangely enough, Jesus is alive, well, and at peace. And, on top of it, **he is not ashamed** of the awful "marks" of death on his body, but is very comfortable with them, and wants his disciples (and us) to take a good look at them.

It's not the "*prettiest*" picture of Easter Sunday. Even if the room were full of lillies & loud shouts of Alleluia — it's still very bizarre. So... what are we to make of it?

When we hear of such strange things (*like so many of the strange things we hear in the Scriptures*), they often appear to be "nonsense." Especially in this case, because we all know that (*in a literal sense*) "dead is dead" & "alive is alive," and "*never the twain shall meet.*" But sometimes, what we take to be utter "**non-sense**" is just something that makes "no — **obvious** — sense" to us. And what is most obvious to us is always the **literal** sense of a scripture text. But what if the sense that it makes is not literal, *not at all obvious*, but **hidden**?

We might like to imagine that the resurrected Jesus was lilly-white and "unmarked" by death — that he didn't look **so very strange**. We might easily rationalize away the visible, tangible "marks" of the nails and the spear as just a "*simulation*" — a kind of super "makeup job" — that God did on Jesus in order to help the apostles "**I.D.**" him as the same person who died three days ago. That might make the "sense" of it all seem more obvious to us.

But what if, instead, we just take the testimony of the apostolic witnesses — **as it is** — as extremely strange? What if we just **stay** with the strangeness of it — allowing it to "*unsettle*" our usual ways of thinking — instead of trying to make it "*go away*" or to "*clean it up*" or "*dress it up*" into a prettier picture? What if we let — **it** — change our **minds**, instead of letting our **minds** — change **it**? Then, I think, we're positioning ourselves to discover the *hidden* sense of the resurrection — which is not at all obvious — but life-changing.

The visible, tangible "marks" of the nails and the spear are ways that the apostolic witnesses are affirming that this Jesus is **so much** the same person who died three days ago that — in the same way **THAT** person was dead — so is he.

And yet, he is alive. This Jesus is, at the same time, Christ Crucified (bearing the awful signs of death) and the Risen Christ (bearing the vibrant signs of life). He is, at the same time, both truly *dead* and truly *alive*.

If, for a bit, we can just sit with, and embrace the strangeness of such a Christ, it can open our minds to understand the life-changing, **hidden** sense of the resurrection.

The marks of death Jesus bears are really there, visibly & tangibly. And he feels they are crucially important for the death-fearing disciples to **see** — and, if necessary, to **touch** — so they can understand the message of his "marks." For although visible & tangible, these "marks" are now "empty" of their usual fearsome meaning. They are there, but they are a powerless "nothing." What they reveal to the disciples — is **not that they won't die, as Jesus did, and we all will** — but that "being dead" is not something to be afraid of. Death is certain. But the **power** of death — which is the **fear** that it can utterly separate us from life — has been defeated. Death has lost its "*sting*." **This Christ** — the One who is both crucified & risen — is the Truth that sets us free, and "*sets free all those who have been held in slavery by their fear of death*" (Heb. 2:15.)

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Apart from being poorer, less educated, and less protected from harm than we are — the apostles were no different than us. Their story was the story of every human life. It has a beginning, and an end. Like us, they preferred to not think about it, but (*intuitively*) they knew that their lives were always "hemmed in" by death from the very beginning. It was sad, but it was obviously true.

But, then, a radically different story suddenly irrupts in the midst of that normal human story that they all believed in. The story of One who freely accepted death, met it face-to-face, got to know it *as it is in itself*, and was no longer hemmed in by it. He didn't "**destroy**" death; he became free of its **power**. Free of the fear of it. And then, he "**included**" the *death-there-is-now-no-need-to-fear* into his story, as another important chapter. But it then became a very strange story indeed. It made no obvious human sense, because it had no end. It was deathless (*as we normally understand death*.) And in the minds of his disciples, it turned what Jesus called "*the world*" upside-down.

This is the point — the value — of sitting with, and embracing, the strangeness of the Living Christ, **marks & all**. If we mentally "erase" the marks, we miss the point, and the fear of death retains its hold on us. Through the strangeness of today's gospel story, the apostle John is seeking to foster — *in us* — the same **immense change of perception** that he and the other apostles experienced on Easter evening *when the fear of death was drained out of their minds*. It transformed their perception of God — of Life & Death — and the whole of human reality. They began to **share** in the unusual intelligence & perspective which Jesus **had already had** before his death, but a perspective which had (*previously*) always left them dazed, confused, and doubting. They began to see how they could be dead to sin, and alive to Christ, at the same time. For John, this radically different perception & perspective — untainted, un-constricted by the fear of death — is what defines an Easter People, and what he is trying to transmit to us in the strange picture he paints of the Living Christ in this morning's passage.

There is another gift for us in this story, which (in closing) I'd like to leave you with.

Remember that the visible, tangible "marks" of death on the body of the Living Christ are now a powerless "nothing," because he knows death as it is in itself — and there's nothing to fear in it. Remember that the "marks" are "empty" of their former "scary" meaning.

But they still have a very powerful meaning. It's just no longer a terrifying one. The "marks" proclaim that death cannot be "cancelled out," so that only life remains. That cannot be. But it doesn't **need** to be. It's only fear that gives death a scary "bark," but (in truth) it has no bite. In truth, death is vacant — an empty shell with nothing terrible inside — and an important part **of life, not life's enemy**. And so, Jesus does not see his "marks" as something to be **ashamed** of and hidden out of sight — but rather — as something to be **proud** of and openly shown to others, *so they will not be afraid*.

The **hidden** sense of John's passage, the transforming **truth** of it, is that the "marks" of Jesus are like "trophies." They tell the story of where he has been, and what he learned & accomplished there. They are "outward signs of the inward grace" that conquers the **fear** of death, and gives death back its proper place in life. And, at the same time, his "marks" are a witness which condemns the violence in the human world, that makes death its weapon, to dominate & lay to waste, the lives of others.

If we are honest with ourselves, we all have our "marks." I have mine. You have yours. They may be outwardly visible, or lie invisibly within our hearts & minds. They may be the result of violence (blatant or subtle) that was done to us. They may be the result of our own tragic choices. Or a combination of the two.

But however we got our "marks," and whether they have been healed, or are still painful and in need of care — they have a story to tell. And their story can't somehow be "cancelled out" or made to "disappear" because their story is a part of our lives that — inevitably — we carry with us (in one way or another.)

But our "marks" — whatever they are, however big or small — are nothing to be **ashamed** of and **hidden** out of site. When we let them be seen as they are (*which is not pretty*) — and let them be cared for by God — and by the spiritual 'grownups' among God's people — our "marks" become *like the "marks" of the Risen Christ*. They become empty of fear, no longer infectious or harmful to ourselves & others. They tell the hard story of where we have been & what we learned there. How we made it through & how we were healed. They become like "trophies." Something to be proud of and openly shown to others, so they will not be afraid. This is the life we were born into at Baptism — when we were safely held, touched with the holy oil, and blessed with the holy words, *"I mark you with the sign of the cross. You belong to Christ forever."*

When we get to Heaven (whenever & wherever that may be), and fear & shame are only a distant memory — I think an important part of it will probably be wandering around and seeing the "marks" on all the other saints, and listening to the stories behind them — how they got from there to here, and what they learned on the way. And, of course, they'll all be sitting on the edge of their seats to see **our** "marks" and hear the stories behind them. And give glory to God for leading us from there to here.

So while we're waiting for that eternal, blissful day to come... and have time on our hands... let's accept & make the most of our "marks" — for our good, and the good of all who need to hear their story. Thanks be to God.

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