

Later That Day  
April 23, 2006- Sunday After Easter

I titled this sermon, “Later that Day”... The actual translation from the gospel of John is, “When it was evening on that day.” The emphasis is on those words, “that day.” Either phrase sounds to me like a teaser from an old radio show. Later that day, back in the sleepy town of Jerusalem, dot, dot, dot.....

But of course, Jerusalem was not a sleepy town on that day. It was a town still reeling from the events of the past three days. It was a town just beginning to hear about what had happened earlier that day. In John’s gospel, from which this story comes, Mary Magdalene has already told the disciples that she had seen the Lord. In this version of the story Mary weeps when she sees the empty tomb, sure that the body of her teacher, her friend, the one she had followed – sure that the body had been removed and hidden. Angels are present in the tomb and they ask Mary why she is weeping and once she explains her fear, Jesus stands beside her but she does not know that it is Jesus. She thinks that this man is the gardener. They exchange a few words, but it is not until Jesus addresses her by name that Mary greets him as Rabbouni, teacher. With this description, even before we get to the story of what happens later that day, we have the pattern for how the risen Christ is going to appear to those who were his followers, those who scattered at the time of his death, those who try to understand the empty tomb.

The pattern the appearances follow is both spiritual and physical, both mysterious and practical, both abstract and concrete. And all beg the question as to whether or not these appearances after the empty tomb are appearances by Jesus of Nazareth, just as he appeared before the crucifixion. Does this man look just like the Jesus with whom his followers had walked and talked? It would seem not.

In all of these post-resurrection appearances, there is a certain amount of confusion or mystery. And well there might be because all of these people had seen their teacher, their friend die on a cross. They had seen his body placed in a tomb. Some had even seen the tomb sealed with a great stone. They were not looking to see him beside them as they walked. They were not expecting him to address them by name. They were not waiting for him to appear in their midst. So when he does any of these things there is a period of time when they do not know who he is.

Let’s look more closely at the story that was our lesson this morning. The disciples were gathered in a house that was locked because they were fearful of repercussions from the authorities. They were followers of this man Jesus who had been put to death. We cannot be certain, because the gospel accounts differ, that the disciples all knew that the tomb had been found empty. In Luke it says that the women told the disciples, but the disciples did not believe them because it seemed to them an idle tale. In the gospel of Mark, the women who found the empty tomb ran away frightened and told no one. Their fear, we can assume, did not dissipate so quickly that they had begun to tell the story by evening of that same day.

So the disciples were in this locked house and suddenly Jesus stood among them. This adds to the mystery. Jesus does not knock on the door or call to them from the outside. There is no explanation of how he gets into this place that is locked. He is just suddenly there. He is standing among them. And there is no reaction from the disciples. He says to them, "Peace be with you." This is a common enough greeting, but full of import because of the setting and the speaker. There is still no reaction from the disciples. Then Jesus shows them his hands and his side. The writer of John says, "Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord." Mind you, he has been standing there and talking to them, but it is not until he shows them the physical evidence of his crucifixion that they understand who this is.

The entire scene illustrates the tension between the mysterious or abstract and the tangible or concrete. The Christ breathes on the disciples, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit" – strange and spiritual. Then, the next time he is with them he offers to Thomas, who wanted to place his finger in the mark of the nails and his hand in the wounded side, the opportunity to do just that – real and concrete. As an aside, it is interesting to note that according to the writer of John, Thomas does not take advantage of this offer. It is as if the offer to place your hands here is enough to calm the doubts of Thomas.

So what does all this have to do with us? What do the occurrences set "later that day" have to do with you and me and all of us who live nearly 2,000 years later and struggle to find our faith and follow the risen Christ. Well, what occurred to me is that we are "later that day" people. We are formed into this community of faith by the events of that day, but we were not present on that day. We did not see the empty tomb. We did not see that death on a cross or the placement of the body in the tomb. We often fail to recognize the risen Christ in our midst. And we wrestle with that tension between the awesome mystery of our faith and the concrete and tangible questions that we need to ask and have answered.

In just a few minutes we will celebrate the sacrament of baptism. The old definition of a sacrament that some of us had to memorize was, "An outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace." The sacrament of baptism is kind of like this appearance of the risen Christ. There is some mystery occurring. In ways that we cannot explain, Isabella, Zach, Sam and Lucy will be welcomed into the Christian family, not just this part of the Christian family, but the whole body of believers across the ages. Prayers will be said and all the images of water and what it has been to us will be called up. But along with that mystery, there are some very ordinary things that will happen.

Isabella, Zach, Sam and Lucy will be carried in the arms of their parents, and they will sleep or cry or fidget or laugh. Plain ordinary New York City water will be placed on their heads. They will probably not remember a bit of this, and at some later time they will decide whether or not to confirm for themselves the promises made for them. And you in this congregation will make very concrete promises to these four little ones. You will promise to show them the love of God, not just now when they are cute and loveable but always.

Perhaps that is the point of this story of what happened “later that day.” In the tension of the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the tangible, the mysterious and the ordinary something happens. God’s love can be in our midst. And maybe, just maybe, if we pay attention during this and all the sacramental moments of our lives, we will experience the risen Christ, and we will find a way to rejoice and speak with our lives, “My Lord and my God.”