

“What Easter Makes Clear: Incarnation Matters”

John 20:19-31 Luke 24:13-35 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might truly absorb your love for our entire beings – mind, soul, and body. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

I am continuing last week’s approach of having us read way more scripture than usual today, because sometimes we learn more by zooming out and looking at what the combination of stories tells us, rather than focusing on the specific details of one particular narrative. We are launching a new sermon series today, which I’m calling “What Easter Makes Clear.” We are living in a time when there are some loud voices competing for our attention, trying to re-define our faith in ways that are contrary to the way of Christ. So it is vital that we are as clear as we possibly can be about what it means to follow Jesus. This series will be briefly interrupted next Sunday and the next, while we indulge in garden imagery for our annual stewardship campaign, but we’ll come back to it for the last three Sundays of Eastertide in May.

So today, we’re combining two of the most-commonly-read-the-Sunday-after-Easter stories: the story of “doubting” Thomas and the story of the walk to Emmaus. As a Disciple who loves both communion and bread, and as a person who is pretty squeamish about blood and open wounds, I have a clear preference for one of these stories over the other, and I’m guessing I’m not alone. But I think it’s interesting to

see what new things we can notice when we read them in conversation with one another. What I noticed was just how human these stories are; and not just these stories but most of the immediate Easter stories in the gospels. These are not sophisticated theological treatises; they are stories full of very human details.

Remember how much concern there was last week about the difficult logistics of rolling the stone back to get into the tomb to anoint Jesus' body? And now we've got Thomas fixated on the wounds on Jesus' hand, a very human concern. Even his initial skepticism is a clue that we're talking about real people here. And in the story of the walk to Emmaus, we might not call it a detail exactly, but the rawness and depth of the grief portrayed there seem deeply human to me.

I started realizing that one of the things Easter makes clear, in the way these stories are told, is that Incarnation matters. The idea that God took on flesh is central to what we're doing here as Christians. There are these three "ion" words – that's "i-o-n" not "shun" as in shunning – these three "ion" words – Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. They are based on three verbs: incarnate, crucify, and resurrect. We tend to associate Incarnation with Christmas rather than Easter, when the second and third come up. But the truth is that Crucifixion and Resurrection would make no sense without Incarnation preceding them. God can only die if God has a body first. God can only be raised from the dead if God had a body that could die first. Incarnation is the first act of God's vulnerability taken on in solidarity with humanity.

That vulnerability is then tested and proven when the crucifixion happens. And then the true power of vulnerability is revealed in the resurrection.

If you wanted to consider “zooming out” from another angle, you could apply this observation to what are sometimes called “C & E Christians,” that is, the folks who only show up on Christmas and Easter. But maybe the C&Es are doing us a favor, reminding us that these are the most important moments, because they are the days making the main point: that God is with us, in life and in death, more deeply than we can usually comprehend.

There may be something that feels like a paradox in the middle of all this. To insist that Easter is just as much a testimony to the Incarnation as it is to the Resurrection might make you think that we’re requiring a belief in a literal bodily resuscitation. But if we look at these stories carefully, there is reason to find room for more flexibility. I’m not saying you can’t or shouldn’t believe in a bodily resurrection, but I don’t think scripture requires it here. Mary didn’t recognize Jesus outside the tomb until he called her name. The disciples in their locked room in John “saw the Lord” after he said “Peace be with you.” And Cleopas and his friend didn’t recognize Jesus until, after an entire afternoon of conversation on the road, he came in for dinner and broke the bread. So while the humanity of these stories is clear at the forefront, it’s also held more loosely than we might expect. There is still great mystery clinging to whatever it was that had happened.

I would argue that, in some ways, the mysterious ways these recognitions happen make them even more human. The most human aspect of who we are is never our appearance. But our name, our essence, our being known, being in relationship – the way Mary could see Jesus once her name was called – that’s what makes us human. Hearing the word of Peace after being in such a state of fear, that was what called the disciples back into their bodies, able to see clearly. Being fed by the broken bread – that is, being reminded that we are not self-sustaining machines – that was Cleopas and his friend coming back into themselves, as God’s beloved creatures in the presence of the holy.

So if Easter is a testimony to the Incarnation, what does that mean? What does it mean that Christ on the cross is revealed to be as vulnerable as Christ the newborn king? If Incarnation matters, then we matter. Our bodies matter. Our suffering matters. It means that we are called to live our lives like Jesus lived his: attending to human pain and neediness. It means we feed the hungry. It means we tend to the sick and dying. It means we protect people from violence. It means we work to structure the world in ways that promote the flourishing of all humanity – mind, soul, and body.

Last week, we spent a lot of time saying “Christ is risen indeed!” Let’s stop and think about that for a moment. It makes me wonder if that phrase (or rather something like it in the language Cleopas actually spoke!) was born in that very

moment at the table. To say “Christ is risen indeed” is not that different from saying “He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.” The way these stories are told makes clear that our faith is not just or even mostly about the words that we say. Following Jesus is about acting out what we say we believe, showing it in deeds. Easter tells us that rather than being a religion focused on the “sweet bye-and-bye”, Christianity, the faith of following Jesus is about testifying with our words and our actions that creation matters, that humanity matters, that each and every individual human matters, – from the beloved mother in a hospital bed, to the loud know-it-all at the Saturday breakfast, to the astronauts splashing down in the ocean, to the baby in need of care she cannot get in the bombed-out natal unit of a clinic in Gaza. To proclaim that Incarnation Matters means to spread the news that God took on flesh to show us how precious our flesh is. What Easter makes clear is how holy it is to spend our lives protecting that vulnerable flesh, from infancy through and beyond death. Let us dedicate ourselves to showing the world that Christ is risen, in deed! Hallelujah and Amen!