

# Sermon Notes for Earth Sunday, April 23, 2017

*Readings: Acts 2: 14a, 22-32; Psalm 16; 1 Peter 1: 3-9; John 20: 19-31.*

The Easter Season is a gift of grace: seven weeks to explore the implications of what God has done in raising up the one we crucified; seven weeks for it to sink in that we are the risen body of Christ, the living sacrament of his saving presence to the world.

The entire apostolic witness, the whole New Testament, is founded upon the resurrection of Jesus from the dead; we would never even have heard of him if that had not happened. St Paul has provided our earliest written witness to this stupendous reality, but it was left to the four evangelists to fill out the meaning of 'resurrection'. Only they make it clear that resurrection means an empty tomb! Only they make it clear that the company of Jesus' disciples is now the visible manifestation of his invisible presence!

But what is the significance of an empty tomb? It tells us that God's purposes for the world could not be defeated by destroying the one God sent to redeem it. God gathered up the torn and disfigured corpse of his dear Son and transfigured it into the first fully redeemed human life (body and soul) — a definitive sign of God's intention for us all. Bodies matter to God: flesh and bones, feathers and fur, indeed the entire biosphere that graces the surface of this rocky planet hurtling through space. All will be redeemed, in God's good time. Redeemed, not abandoned for something better.

Here may lie the clue to Thomas' reluctance to accept what the other disciples were telling him (*John 20: 24-25*). "We have seen the Lord," they said. But if they were trying to tell him that Jesus was still alive in spite of having died — that his crucifixion was just another random piece of meaningless violence in a world beyond hope — then as far as Thomas was concerned, Jesus' appearance to the other disciples was not good news at all. "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." Thomas could not dismiss the memory of Jesus' shameful and horrific execution, and he needed to know that God could not dismiss it either.

If God is going to triumph over the evil that defaces this good creation and truly redeem the world, then even the world's catastrophes must be redeemed; they must ultimately come to be recognized as critical moments in the historic drama of "the light that shines in the darkness and is not overcome by it" (*John 1: 1-5*). It was the catastrophe of Jesus' crucifixion that revealed the darkness of our world, and it was the crucifixion of Jesus that revealed the immensity of God's mercy — mercy which holds the world in being and is its only hope of healing. Thus the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands are the crowning perfection of his risen body. Likewise, a redeemed world will bear the marks of our folly and destruction, for these wounds too are part of the drama of its salvation. But the wounds will be healed.

The second reading for this day (*1 Peter 1: 3-9*) sounds like an address to people who have just emerged from the waters of baptism. The Easter Season is a time when we remember our baptism into Christ's death. The life we inherited from our death-dealing culture was buried with Christ in his tomb, to rise with him into a new culture of eternal life, "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for us, who are being protected by the power of God through faith in a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." It is not a salvation out of this world; it is the salvation of the world, in which we participate through hope. Because of this hope we are able to experience even our suffering and loss as a participation in Christ's sufferings, and therefore as part of that great cosmic drama. "In this we rejoice, even if now for a little while we have to suffer trials, so that the genuineness of our faith . . . may be found to result in praise and glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed . . . Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and rejoice with an indescribable joy, for you are receiving the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls."

Notice that the world's eventual salvation is something we "are receiving" — something we are experiencing now, already! The immediate "outcome of our faith" is living a life of eternal significance ("the salvation of our souls"), for as the death and rising of our Lord are replicated in us, we participate in this historic drama of redemption. This is what it means to belong to the company of the baptized, disciples of the risen Christ.

— *John W B Hill*