

MORNING PRAYER
The first Sunday after Easter
04.08.18

In the lesson from St. Luke, the risen Christ appears to His disciples in His resurrection body, but the disciples have trouble believing that it is really He. So Jesus says, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet that it is I myself. Handle me and see.”

In doing that, Jesus did what Professor Hill in “The Music Man” never did. You will recall that the music man was often asked to show his credentials as a musician, but he never did, because he didn’t have any. But the risen Christ, without being asked, immediately displayed the marks that identify Him as the very same person who walked upon the earth and taught and prophesied and healed and was crucified and buried in Jerusalem.

There are some who have said that the figure of the risen Christ is a mass hallucination, the product of wishful thinking on the part of the disciples. There are others who have said that the resurrection of Jesus is a symbolic way of saying that the spirit of Jesus lived on, after His death, in the minds and hearts of His disciples. There are others who say that Jesus is a generic savior, one among many, who represent in a timeless way the cycles of death and rebirth that we observe in nature.

But the gospel will not allow for any such notions. The Scriptures witness to the fact that the Christ whom we worship and serve is the same Jesus who walked and talked and died in ancient Israel.

There is a group of Biblical scholars who call themselves “The Jesus Seminar.” The working thesis of that group is that the Christ who is known by faith and worshiped in the church is very different from the man known to history as Jesus. In other words, what the Jesus Seminar is trying to prove is the very opposite of what the Gospel teaches.

The modern perpetrators of this ancient heresy claim to be able to get behind the testimony of the Gospels and determine what really happened. Usually they blame St. Paul for taking the figure of a simple Galilean peasant and overlaying it with metaphysical material drawn from Greek mythology to create the religion we now know as Christianity. The Gospel, however, makes it clear that the material for understanding and interpreting Jesus comes from Jesus himself, and He drew it from the Hebrew Scriptures, not from the speculations of Gentile philosophers and poets.

In the Gospel, Jesus refers to the things that are written about Himself “in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms.” And when He had identified Himself convincingly to the Apostles, “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” -- the same Scriptures that St. Paul drew upon and referred to as he formulated his theology.

Jesus Himself showed how the Savior of the world needed to suffer and to be killed and to rise from the dead. He showed the disciples how His death and resurrection fulfilled the promise to Abraham that all the world would be blessed through Him. And He showed the disciples how they were to play a part in that great project and action of God.

Not only is the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith whom we worship one and the same, but the wounds that Jesus displays identify Him as Savior and Lord of all -- the one who has authority over us. It is only after He has gone to the Cross in obedience to God the Father and risen from the dead by the power of God that Jesus says in St. Matthew’s gospel, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He has earned that authority by His incomparable sacrifice.

Someone once asked me why God picked that particular time for Jesus to be born and to die and to rise again. The question touched upon what theologians have “called the scandal of particularity”. We might just as well ask why that man and not some other? Why a man and not a woman? Why the Jews and not some other ethnic group? Why that part of the world and not some other place? The answer in every case is what John Calvin called “the sovereignty of God”, or to put it quite simply, we do not know.

We might like to have a general kind of savior and a general kind of religion, but that is not what the sovereign God has chosen to give us. God in His sovereignty has given us a religion based in history, which means based in specific times, specific places, and specific people. He has chosen to speak to us, not through our imaginations but through our senses, and He has chosen to present Himself to us in the person of this man whom we call Jesus. This man, and not another. As Peter says in the passage from Acts, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we may be saved.”

This same Jesus who once walked the hills of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem presents Himself to us in the bread and the wine that we bless and share in His name. He says to us, “This is my body. Take it. Touch it. Taste it. Swallow it. It is I myself.”

This same Jesus opens our minds, if we will allow it, to understand the Old Testament Scriptures. It is in the name of this same Jesus that we are directed to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins to every person in every place and every culture. His presence among us is real, and He charges us to be witnesses to that reality.

The Scriptures witness to the power of this Man over sin and death. The Scriptures witness to the fulfillment in Him of God’s promises to Abraham and Moses and David and Jeremiah. And we too are witnesses. We are witnesses to His presence among us this very day. We are witnesses to His power and direction in our own lives.

St. John says, “That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands ... that we proclaim to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

That is why I stand here before you today and speak as I do. That is also why we have all been baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are witnesses to the fact that the Jesus of history is the Christ of faith, and that He dwells within us and directs our lives, not only here in church but in every area of life.

To the unbelieving apostles, Jesus says, “Why are you troubled, and why do questionings arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.” And to us he says, “This is my body which is given for you. This is my blood which was shed for you.” Take and eat. Take and drink. It is I myself.

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