

Sermon
Breath of New Life
2nd Sunday of Easter

I love Easter. I love Holy Week. Even though I am exhausted afterwards. All the people! Highest attendance ever. The music, the preaching.

And yet I know there are people who came to Easter services who won't be back until Christmas. I understand.

I've been there too.

But it got me thinking...what is it about Easter that is so important.

Easter reminds me that the church's life is intimately bound to Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

As the text said it was That Sunday night in the locked down quarters of the faith community Jesus appeared and breathed upon them...commissioned them to be the church.

Jesus delivered on his promise to the disciples in his earlier farewell discourse.

Do you remember, when he met with them in the upper room and said to them (before he was arrested, killed)...

he said do not be afraid,
my peace I give to you,
I will send to you a comforter, a guide, the holy spirit.

And here he was delivering on that promise.

His life mission complete as he passed on his mission to the disciples.

His mission to reveal the generous love of God.

His mission Passed on from generation to generation until we in 2010 have the opportunity to breath in new life at Easter.

The new life offered to us as a church is to reorient ourselves to the life of Christ.

To see again how incarnation of God's love breathed into life can change the world.

How Jesus shows us that we can breath that incarnation in as well.

How we can develop a faith that leads to new life.

Not just for us but for the world.

We are people shaped by the biblical text.

Engagement with the text, with John's interpretation of God

is vital to the life of faith.

Yeah yeah, preacher, you can say that but you aren't going through a divorce, you aren't stuck in

a dead end job, you don't have a stack of debts with no way of paying them, you didn't just lose a loved one.

No, but I have and will have my own trials and tribulations. So what keeps me coming back to this Christian faith?

For those who have heard me preach before you know that I have a love/hate relationship with the Christian Faith. Maybe that's too strong a description. Maybe it's more like love/doubt. I spent my adolescent years wondering if God existed.

I didn't belong to a church. And I was one of those E and C people who only came to church on Easter and Christmas. I came from a family where there was much suspicion around what the church was or wanted.

When I grew more curious in college I found that Christian Creeds are a set of formulae which of themselves do not prove that Christ was divine, that he rose from the dead, and that there is eternal life.

They function not as proof but as a challenge to Christian consciousness.

Ronald Rolheiser writes in his book *The Shattered Lantern*,

"When a Christian finds herself at odds with the tenants of her faith she must do serious self-examination.

Even one who considers himself purely secular (not religious) must ask himself hard questions like,

"Am I optimally open? How pure or cloudy is my awareness? Am I too preoccupied with certain things and unaware of others? Am I missing the forest for the trees...the watchmaker for the watch...the dancer for the dance...The wide horizon for the narrow perspective ...and the ultimate for the finite?

If I no longer see something is it because it is not there or because I am not present? "

A school of contemplative thought that is commonly referred to as classical theism has a central belief that God is only dead when, in our ordinary lives we lose the awareness of something beyond ourselves.

That night as the weary and traumatized disciples regrouped I wonder what the conversation was like. Mary had returned saying she saw and spoke with Jesus. In fact he had even called out her name. Peter and John said they found the tomb empty with the wrappings lying in the grave. What could it mean? Emotions rising high and low. Shock, anger over Judas suicide. Grief on the loss not only of Jesus but a hope and a dream. Tempers on edge from the lack of sleep and worry. Feelings bruised by the disbelief. Fear about what this could mean. Then he appears. He walks through unhindered, whole, visible. No not a ghost because he shows them his wounds. This is the actual body of Christ walking, speaking, breaking bread. What does this mean?

Just because Thomas had not seen the Christ did it mean he had not risen?
Christ is seen and felt...Thomas comes to awareness.
It is not just the awareness or the joy that their teacher, friend, Jesus is alive...no,
Thomas response is
My Lord and my God!"

I like what the commentary says...God graciously provided what Thomas needed to believe.

Ok lets back up a minute.
What do we actually feel in our ordinary lives.
When we leave the sanctuary on an Easter Sunday...do we go back to life as it was?

We just went through the lives of mystics in our Lenten journey together.
Most of the mystics found it difficult to live in the world and live out a life of faith in ordinary surroundings.
Most of them separated themselves into monasteries, followed teachers and spiritual directors.
Admittedly in a normal day, with all our heartaches and headaches, God is generally absent to us.
Classical theism takes the position that for the most part, God is dead in our day-to-day consciousness
Not because no God exists.
Or that we can only access God in religious experience like on an Easter Sunday.

In our day to day or secular experience we just are not that present to God.

Rolheiser describes, "The secular mindset would have us believe that the immediate is all that there is, that existence begins and ends with the here and now. Beyond the here and now there lies nothing – no explanation, no reason, no final plan or purpose. Existence just is. Our nature is constituted by blind nature or a meaningless void, not hostile but empty of purpose, indifferent, a faceless mystery. We can only talk about it in terms of our phenomenal experience of it, beyond that we can know and speak nothing about what is.

George Santayana writes poetically, Matter is the invisible wind which, sweeping for no reason over the field of essences, raises some of them into a cloud of dust; and that whirlwind we call existence...and, in such a world, necessity is a conspiracy of accidents.

Secularity believes that we are free to shape our lives according to our own choices for meaning as opposed to being obligated to live out a form of obedience to a God above us. We are self-creative,

meant to decide for ourselves the meaning of existence. We choose something not because we are called, but because we freely chose it to give meaning to our lives. We are our own project, called to creativity, not obedience.

Obedience, submission, self-surrender to something beyond us...other...is seen as naïve or weak in the face of the truth of our condition. We are on our own.

The suggestion that one must be obedient to a transcendent God or a transcendent norm is an affront to the contemporary secular mindset. It is time to be free, come of age. grow up.

Do we experience ourselves and the world in this way? Sometimes....

When we feel helpless, empty, dependent, terrified. Much like the disciples felt in the locked room. When there is deep emotional pain, that pain can totally relativize everything and leave us with the feeling that the here and now is flimsy and unimportant.

I'm sure Thomas and the others questioned their allegiance to Jesus and the teachings they heard. What did it matter now?

Here is the key to Rolheiser's description of secularism...

If we believe that there is nothing, no god, no ultimate foundation, no meaning to existence, than nothingness itself takes on the character of the ultimate and forces our horizon beyond the here and now. An infinite void becomes the god before which everything we are and do is threatened in an ultimate way. God is experienced not as a first and final principle that creates and sustains us, but as a threat that can extinguish us. Nonetheless there is the sense of something absolute.

Confronted by the absolute void we can search for some positive ultimate...a gracious god who can steady our lives.

Have you experienced moments of inexplicable joy, meaning, strength that is only explained by something beyond us?

Landon Gilkey

We all love our own being, our existence, our life. Humans are aware of many joys, of course, but underneath all of them there is the exultation in

being alive, in feeling and using one's powers –of sensing, smelling, eating, loving, using one's body. Here we experience the sheer joy of being and existing; here the reality and power of existence are felt from the inside as joyful vitality. And this inner and most vital joy is the center and ground of all valuing; it provides the most basic reason for existing, though it is much more a fundamental tone to our being in the world than it is a rational reason. This sense of goodness of existence is experienced as a gift, uncreated by ourselves."

It is being present to our lives, present to the gift, in contemplation that opens the world up to experience God. It is when we are not present to our lives that God feels dead.

One night when Ellen woke up with a bad dream I held her said,
"Don't be afraid – everything is all right."
Isn't that a profession of faith?
that we are ultimately in the hands of graciousness and love.

This perception comes not as rational thought but as a felt sense.

Jesus appearance to the disciples is that same reassurance.

This belief is given to the disciples through ordinary perception and awareness –

Seeing Jesus, touching his wounds

Hearing his voice.

That gives a sense that in the end everything is all right.

My peace I give to you. Jesus says.

A Prisoner about to be executed by Nazis during the WWII wrote on the concentration camp wall;

I believe in the sun, even when it isn't shining.

I believe in love, even when I feel it not.

I believe in God, even when he is silent.

How do we possess this ability to affirm graciousness and love as the heart of reality even when the here and now demands the opposite?

Somehow we encounter in the here and now...despite the brutal suggestion that death is the final answer – as gracious absolute.

That is the story of Jesus appearance to the disciples.

Death is not the final answer...

there is a gracious absolute....

here it is

God graciously provides the means to that belief by raising Jesus from the dead.

By having witnesses record the story.

By the retelling of the story over and over for two thousand years so that we could hear it again in a 21st century setting.

My peace I leave with you. Jesus says

Eric Mascall

Be aware of what is gift in your life. Be alert to and searingly honest in accepting all that you find present in your experience and you will find that you are not a self-sufficient being but that at each second of your life you are being created, sustained, challenged, and redeemed by some absolute beyond you. When the sense of gift is lost, we experience the death of the Giver!

When we see our lives as gift

When we can be present to that life

With all of our senses

Feel that every second, we and everything in our
universe are being actively breathed into existence
and held by God
then our eyes will be opened
our hearts will be opened
and we will recognize that Christ was in the room
with us all along.

Amen