

EASTER III

And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Luke 24:39

Today is a big day for us here at St John's. Today we welcome Sarah Deane into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. As always, we rejoice in this moment. Also today, I say farewell to this community for four months, as I embark on my sabbatical and vacation time. And while it is not Steve Domienik's or Marie Campbell's last Sunday, I will have to bid farewell to them today, as they will be leaving St John's later in the spring to embark on the next phases of their journeys. And while I am away, Evan Smith and his family and Ann Wetherilt will also be moving on – leaving our local, physical community but not departing from our minds our hearts

So, a Sunday of hellos and goodbyes, a Sunday of transitions. It's also a Sunday when we hear the Gospel Story of Jesus' Resurrection appearance to the disciples on the shores of Galilee. This is the second appearance we've heard of since Easter: last week, the story of the locked room and Thomas, this week, the story of the eating of fish.

How can one speak of the presence of one who has died? What was the risen Jesus like? What is the meaning of the resurrection? How is this Jesus present now?

Today's Gospel reminds us that these questions are not simply *our* questions, not simply modern questions. Jesus' early followers were possessed by skepticism themselves, and Jesus confronts their doubts directly.

First, in response to the disciples' terror that they are seeing a ghost, he offers his hands and feet for them to touch, to feel, to examine carefully. Then he asks whether they have anything to eat, and consumes a piece of broiled fish. These acts are meant, we assume, to dispel any notion that Jesus is a figment of the disciples' imagination. *Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.*

As I was pondering my sermon, my poetry group was meeting. One of my poet friends is also a psychic, and I asked him what he thought about the resurrection. He said, "I'm a Docetist." {Docetism is (a belief) most commonly attributed to the Gnostics, many of whom believed that matter was evil, and as a result God would not take on a material body... (Therefore), the body of Jesus must have been an illusion and, likewise, his crucifixion. Docetism was rejected by the ecumenical councils and mainstream Christianity, and largely died out during the first millennium A.D.} (Wikipedia)

It follows, in Docetist thinking, that if Jesus' body was an illusion, his resurrection appearances were, as well. That is, Jesus was what we might term a ghost. So these resurrection appearances in the canonical Gospels, with their insistence on Jesus' physicality, can be read as counter evidence to the Gnostic heresies, including Docetism, which flourished alongside infant Christian orthodoxy – or what came to be defined as orthodoxy.

"I believe, " my friend Kurt went on, "that Jesus had the gift of appearing to people in inner visions, which seemed to them to be outward, physical appearances. He and his gift appeared at a time when belief in physical resurrection was dying out of Judaism. So Christianity took it over. Also," he said, "Jesus believed that capacity to appear to others, once the body has died, is available to anyone."

Whatever we may make of the Gnostics' view of the resurrection, or my psychic friend's view of it, as an inner experience translated – or mistranslated – into an external, physical experience, what seems very clear is to Jesus' disciples and to the early Jesus movement, Jesus appeared, still, very *present*. He was very much with them, among them. They clung to his vividness, the comfort of him, the blessing of him.

We've all had these experiences with those we have loved and lost. They remain alive for us, appear and reappear to us, in manifestations that feel different and more powerful than mere memory. Our dead visit us. And as the poet T. S. Eliot says in a passage from *The Four Quartets*, a passage that perhaps expresses something of the mystery of the sacrament of baptism:

We die with the dying
See, they depart, and we go with them.
We are born with the dead
See, they return, and bring us with them.

Isn't that another way of saying, as I will in the baptismal Prayer over Water, *We thank you, God, for the water of Baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in death. By it we share in Christ's resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.?*

Just as our dead – all the Saints who have departed their mortal bodies – remain among us, so too, those who leave our community remain among us, leave with us a presence that is somehow more than memory alone. I will leave you for a while, and Steve and Marie, Evan and Deidre, Claire, Elise and Breda, Ann and Peg, will leave you more permanently, but something of our spirits will remain here when we go, and I, myself, will return.

The resurrection stories witness to us that these times of transitions – these comings and goings – are complex, and difficult, and bear sorrow in them. But

they bear, as well, reassurance, hope and promise. The resurrection stories remind us of the presence of the Risen Christ in our own midst.

For me, the Risen Christ has been vividly present to me in this community these last months. Particularly in these sad weeks since my mother died, I have always been eager and grateful to enter St John's and receive the sympathy and warmth and love that has awaited me here. I have felt held in your embrace, and I am keenly aware of how I will miss you all, and how I will look forward to returning to you in the fall, refreshed and renewed in body and spirit.

You are the community – this community of sympathy, warmth, and love, into which we now welcome Sarah Emma Deane. And she is well and truly blessed to be among you, in the presence of the Risen Christ.

Alleluia, Alleluia .Amen