

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Easter Vigil

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

I like solving puzzles, and my favorite puzzle is Sudoku. Whenever I fly, I while away my time by solving Sudoku puzzles. There are usually four Sudoku puzzles on a page, and I start with the most difficult one because I have this mindset that once I am able to solve the most difficult, I can simply work my way through the least difficult. More often than not, I achieve my target. The ability to solve these puzzles gives me some satisfaction. Not a satisfaction of superiority but one of elation and excitement. But there is also some disappointment when I am unable to solve even one of those puzzles. In moments like that I ask myself, how come I was able to solve a similar puzzle but cannot solve this particular one? As frustrated as I maybe, I let go with the acknowledgement that I could not solve the puzzle, but I do also maintain some hope that I may be able to solve the next one that I come across.

Our problem is we often approach the resurrection with the same attitude; a puzzle that must be solved. In just the same way that we solve Sudoku, crossword puzzle or any other puzzle, we feel we are obligated to solve this two thousand year old puzzle. This isn't because there is something wrong with our approach of trying to solve this puzzle, there is nothing wrong because the human mind invites such an inquiry.

Who wouldn't have been amazed peeping into that empty tomb and finding only the linen cloths lying by themselves? Who wouldn't have been dumbfounded? Who wouldn't have asked how? Who wouldn't have asked why? Who wouldn't have asked what this is all about? Who wouldn't have asked what is going on? The anomaly is that we struggle to find meaning in the questions as opposed to actually living into the experience of the mystery.

Granted that Jesus told the disciples about the Son of Man being handed over to sinners, be crucified and on the third day rise again, but to the women, that was then, and this is now.

I have little confidence in the fact that the disciples actually understood what Jesus meant when he made the statement the two men reminded the women. But be that as it may, the women are now dealing with the reality of what Jesus said-Jesus is alive as he predicted.

The profound questions which this new reality provokes add a new twist to the whole Jesus story. If Jesus' life wasn't problematic before, it has now taken on a more complex outlook, in that the person who was crucified, died and was buried is no longer in the tomb. How do we explain this? Fact is, the idea of the resurrection of the dead wasn't a unique idea, it was a prevalent phenomenon in antiquity, but at best, the stories were simply communal folklores.

And as the gospel story recounts, some of the disciples who were with Peter when the women shared the story of the resurrection actually thought the story of the women were idle tales. And for that reason, did not bother to run with Peter to the tomb where Jesus was laid.

The disciple who had previously denied Jesus three times, was so moved by the story of the women that he wasn't ready to dismiss the story, but decided to check it out. And when he did, he left the tomb amazed at what he saw. How is this possible?

This question has not left human lips for over two thousand years, mainly because we are amazed by this story but also drawn to the desire to think the resurrection to be a question that need an answer or a problem that need a resolution. Yes, indeed the human mind invites inquiry but the resurrection is not accessible to human language, nor is it open to scientific analysis.

Science by itself does not provide us with an exhaustive description of the reality of nature, how then can we rely on science to help us understand a phenomenon that fills the human void and offers meaning to a shattered life?

The gospel fills the void in us because it awakens in us faith in the resurrection. For that reason, we do not have to count on the accuracies of the resurrection stories in order to believe because our emptiness is touched and filled by a gospel which proclaims a risen and living Lord who is able to be in a relationship with us because he is alive.

In their encounter with the two men in dazzling clothes after they experienced the empty tomb, the two men asked the terrified women a very curious question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The living no longer dwells with the dead; sin can no longer dwell with righteousness: for if we were dead because of sin, we are now alive because of the righteousness of God in Christ. We are now alive because God raised Christ from the dead with new life.

And so it is with anyone who finds life, and is alive. That person can no longer be buried in their sins. Through the gift of baptism, that person finds newness of life, through the gift of baptism, that person is raised and made anew. Remember, it is the gospel of divine love that becomes incarnate for our sake, suffers on Calvary for our sake, and promises us that we will be united eternally with God. God so loves us, and his love is such that He would not only want us to fully receive that love, but to share it as well. In my mind, the gospel requires a resurrected Jesus and resurrected believers, without a resurrected Jesus and resurrected believers, there will be no consummation of love.

Do I feel humbled by the story of the resurrection? You bet I do. I do not know why the disciples claimed Jesus to be alive if there was no reason to believe he was alive. These disciples were not some sophisticated lot who could devise an elaborate scheme; they were mainly simple fishermen. We may not know why they believed Jesus to be alive, but their testimony is clear. Something happened. Something turned the fisherman Peter into an evangelist. Something turned what used to be an idle tale into a symbol of divine benevolence and providence.

Peter and his friends came to understand the overwhelming power that had taken them over. They may have tried to understand the puzzle of the resurrection, but they gave up on that quest because what they came to realize as a plausible explanation of the new life they had, was a response to a God who perceives us with compassion, and in whose life, death and resurrection, we can see a love that calls for and promises a consummation of love.

The resurrection will forever remain a puzzle for many; it may not be like our typical Sudoku or crossword puzzle, but I have longed ceased to look at it as a puzzle. It is more direct and personal for me, it is my experience of the living Lord in a love mediated to me through Jesus Christ. I believe in this gospel primarily because I find myself responding to the love of God with my own love-however unwholesome and wretched it might be. Amen.