

After the Fact
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Have you ever been in a large gathering – at a performance or a party, for instance – when you felt a communal whoosh of enthusiasm? When something happened that seemed to capture everyone on a similar level: something that pulled them together and uplifted them at the same time? Maybe it was when dancing the horah at a Jewish wedding, or at a sports event. Years ago I used to attend the Bread and Puppet Resurrection Circus and Pageant in Glover, Vermont. At the end of the evening pageant, a surreal performance with political and spiritual overtones, in the twilight, a giant puppet – I always thought of it as God, but I guess it is really Mother Earth - would appear to destroy evil and rescue humanity. The arrival of this puppet – huge head, long arms - over the brow of the hill was preceded by flying bird puppets that seemed to announce the arrival of peace. It was such a beautiful sight, and seemed to answer some need in everyone who was gathered. Whoosh! We were joined and uplifted.

Now, I could analyze all this by looking at the way the performance was planned, the construction of the puppets, the timing, the light, the sounds. And that would be interesting, for those who like to think about theater. But what is fascinating was the effect on the group: something harder to pin down. Something was communicated through the air in an almost palpable way. The important thing was the way it made people feel and behave.

So when we read the resurrection stories, and there are a number of them in our Scriptures, we could try to figure the mechanics of what exactly happened. It is so vague, in some ways. A dead person shows up alive and talks to his friends. How, and when exactly: how was this event constructed, with light and sound and timing. But the real story is how those disciples were affected, how they changed, what was communicated to them. We imagine from hearing the resurrection stories that Jesus both remained the same person who had been executed, and was somehow completely different. It seems that the disciples went through a transformation as well: a resurrection of their own.

We start on Easter evening. In John's account, one of the female disciples, Mary Magdalene, had already encountered Jesus in the early morning at his tomb: we read this at the early morning Easter service last week. She didn't recognize him by sight, only by his voice, when he spoke her name. There seemed to be different messages given by her different senses. Recognition is sensory – and can happen in ways that surprise us. So the frightened disciples knew that something strange was going on. They were probably full of other emotions too: guilt for having left Jesus to suffer alone, fear that they might be associated with him and punished as well, and, I imagine, a sense of aimlessness. Who were they now? What was the purpose of their group? Why should they keep gathering, except to commiserate with each other? With Jesus gone, they were just a group of ex-followers of a dead prophet. The closed doors of the room reflected a shut-down on many levels.

So in the darkness of evening, Jesus' appearance in the shut-down room is shocking. His familiar voice speaks familiar words: "Peace be with you." Or as our Muslim friends would say,

“Salaam Aleikum.” Shalom Aleikhem. This very common greeting of the Jewish community had been adopted and invested by Jesus with deeper meaning. We hear echoes of Jesus speaking at his last meal with his friends: “My peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives.” We get the sense that this is a tangible, vibrant Peace: an active Peace, so to speak. Spoken in that room of guilt and fear and sorrow and aimlessness, it has a special power. There is no condemnation here, no lecturing. Just a peace that dissolves fear and heals grief. The terrible events of the past are not erased: they are quite evident in the wounds on his hands and his side. These things cannot be ignored, but they can be transformed into a sign for the future. The disciples have been forgiven already for any lack of courage or trust. They receive that gift of peace.

This active, moving peace comes with marching orders: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” This Gospel conflates Easter and Pentecost to the same day as Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit or Holy Breath into his friends. We hear this as an echo of the Spirit of God moving over the waters of creation. On the eighth day, the disciples are a new creation, a new body created out of the ruins of an old life. In fact, they are now Christ’s body, sent to do the work he had begun.

What is the first step, the first task of the new body? Unlike Luke’s Pentecost story, the first task is not testifying and preaching in a cacophony of languages. It is a bit quieter, and a bit more demanding, I think. It is about forgiving, something Jesus did a lot of in his healing work. The new body of Christ has the power to forgive sins. It also has the power to refuse to forgive, to “retain sins.” This is a huge responsibility, a huge challenge and a little frightening. I believe that this power has been abused often in the past, with an emphasis on retaining people’s sins. Maybe that is just human nature: the hoarding of resentment, that possessiveness of moral high ground. But I think that Jesus’ gift holds the possibility to transform our tendency to retain. He is saying, “You **could** retain peoples’ sins, but I have forgiven **you**. Your mission is one of forgiveness and reconciliation.”

One odd thing about this story: these 10 disciples are still hiding out after they've seen the risen Jesus, an entire week after that Pentecost experience. Something was incomplete. Someone missed out on that wonderful Easter evening. Thomas the Twin was out running his errands, brave soul that he was, and wasn’t there for that greeting and that breath and that gift. I wonder if his insistence on **not** believing was actually a wound in itself: the wound of exclusion, the wound of the outsider who had not yet heard about forgiveness. His is not a clinical, rationalistic doubt. It is rooted in sincere need, a deeper questioning of purpose.

And so, on this eighth day of creation, this need is addressed. Jesus returns in much the same way to the locked room, with the same greeting. He turns to our friend Thomas to welcome the questions. I spoke earlier of the levels of sensory understanding and recognition. Now we add another sense to sight and hearing: touch. In addition to hearing the voice calls one’s name, in addition to seeing a beloved friend in a locked room, we are invited to touch the wounds made by ruthless violence. And to know that Peace, powerful, life-giving Peace, is possible even here.

William Sloane Coffin once said, "As I see it, the primary religious task these days is to try to think straight....You can't think straight with a heart full of fear, for fear seeks safety, not truth. If your heart's a stone, you can't have decent thoughts--either about personal relations or about international ones. A heart full of love, on the other hand, has a limbering effect on the mind." The story of Thomas on the eighth day after the fact of resurrection is often used to contrast faith and

doubt, rationality and spirituality. But belief is not about propositional assent to something unseen. Belief is about trusting our intuitions and insights into the way of Jesus enough to act on them. When people ask for assurance that Christ somehow still lives after the events of Good Friday, the only proof that can be given is the Body of Christ, the church. If people are skeptical about the reality of the Spirit living in this Body, the church, perhaps it is because we are not always clear about reflecting the gifts of the eighth day in the locked room. So the questioning, the doubt, the skepticism we see may be quite valid. Many people perceive the church as judgmental rather than loving. How well are we following Jesus, if that is the way people perceive us? Do we breathe Peace – active, life-giving Peace – into the world? Do we forgive as freely as we were forgiven? Do we call people by name, appear in places of fear, touch the wounds of hate? What evidence do we give of transformation?

You will have your own answers to these questions, based on your private needs and wounds and joys. And we will have communal answers, based in our common endeavors. We find answers, but even as we do so, we encourage skeptical questions, the deeper probing of Thomas, because we have seen how fruitful this is. As the theologian Paul Tillich told us, "Doubt is not the opposite of faith; it is one element of faith."

The gift of the Spirit can be signaled by a Whoosh! of enthusiasm, a shared response to a beautiful moment. It can be signaled by a glimmer of hope in a dark room. Or it can be seen when a gathering of people finds meaning in the work assigned in John's Pentecost: loving, forgiving, sharing, hoping.

Jesus' resurrection appearance is the promise that his love will drive out guilt and fear, that his peace will move us, and that we can now and always step in courage outside the locked doors, speaking and living the words we have heard: Peace be with you. Amen.