The Resurrection of Our Lord


2. Colossians 3:1-4. If you are raised with Christ, set your minds on things that are above.

3. John 20:1-9 (10-18). Mary Magdalene finds the tomb empty, tells the disciples, and Jesus appears to her. Or Matthew 28:1-10. The women find the tomb empty, and Jesus appears to them as they rush to tell the disciples.

The shorter Johannine lesson takes up two of John's most prominent agendas, namely, the relationship of sight to faith and the problem of elitist leaders in the church. In John, someone else is invariably closer to Jesus than Peter, and it is most often the anonymous "disciple whom Jesus loved." Here the two of them race to the tomb, and predictably, Peter not only loses the footrace, but though he sees first what is (or is not) inside the tomb, the other disciple believes first. John's point for elitists in the church seems to be that what makes a disciple is not a person's striving or priority, but Jesus' love.

The theme concerning sight and faith is developed for the second and third generations of Christians struggling to believe without benefit of sight. This theme climaxes in the Thomas story of chapter 20, part of the next Sunday's gospel lesson (see below).

John 20:11-18, the story of the risen Jesus speaking to Mary Magdalene, also takes up an aspect of the seeing/believing discussion and seems to say that sight is not enough to produce faith. Hearing is also necessary, in this case Mary's hearing Jesus speak her name. The good shepherd who laid down his life for the sheep is heard to speak in the voice which the sheep recognize (cf. John 10:4).

The Mary Magdalene scene also depicts Mary as the "winner" of one of the contests underway in John. She is the first to see, believe, and proclaim the resurrection gospel. It was not Peter the honcho, or even the beloved...
disciple, but this woman. How that must have galled whatever gnostic chauvinist pig readers John might have had in those early days or in these latter days!

But there is a sad side to this story, too. Mary lost Jesus, the one she loved, three times in 48 hours. First she lost him to the cross and the Romans. She went to the cemetery to grieve, as those who lose loved ones have always done. Then she lost Jesus again. The body was gone and her grief would now be incomplete. Then comes the indescribable joy of finding and recognition. "Mary," he said, as only he could say it. But then she lost him again. "Don't touch me," he said. "I must return to the Father." Where he went he had to go alone, at least for now. Again she was alone. Mary was thus the first to learn that this side of the resurrection, after Jesus' and before our own, Jesus' life is ours not by touching it but by living it. She would have to be his lips, hands, and feet in this world. We are the same by baptism, and when we baptize others into our number we name them by name, and they hear the voice of the shepherd, and they recognize it, and they live.

The uniquely Matthean features of the alternate gospel lesson (Matthew 28:1-10) are the earthquake at the angel's coming, the joy of the women at the angel's message, and Jesus' meeting the women and speaking with them. The earthquake at this point and also at the moment of the crucifixion (27:51-53) point the reader to the vision in Zechariah 14 which speaks of the day in which God will come and save Jerusalem, and in the process break open the Mount of Olives, which has for centuries been a cemetery, and the "holy ones" will come with God. The point seems to be that the moment of the crucifixion marked the onset of the eschaton, and Jesus is the first of the holy ones.

By adding the "great joy" of the women to Mark's notoriously brief and mysterious account, Matthew associates the women with the Gentile magicians who experienced "great joy" when they came to visit the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:10), while Herod and all Jerusalem experienced only a fearful "trouble" over the birth of Jesus.

Finally, the meeting with Jesus takes place on the way to Galilee and on the way to telling their news. For
Matthew, Galilee is of the Gentiles, and Matthew is much concerned to legitimate the Gentile mission. In the final scene of Matthew's story, Jesus promises to be with the disciples to the end of the age as they go about the work of discipling the Gentiles (panta ta ethne). What he promises to the disciples he has already fulfilled in his earlier meeting with the women on their way to tell their joyous proclamation.

Second Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 2:14a, 22-32. Peter preaches concerning the risen Jesus to "men of Israel."
2. 1 Peter 1:3-9. Despite trials, in the resurrection of Jesus we have hope.
3. John 20:19-31. Jesus appears to the disciples, then to Thomas, too.

This gospel lesson for Easter 2 in each of the three lectionary cycles has many possibilities for preaching. Many of John's themes are drawn together and concluded in this pericope.

The first paragraph is John's Pentecost. Jesus has already ascended to the Father (cf. 20:17) and now comes among the disciples apparently unbound by the limits of space and time. He shows them his wounds, breathes the Holy Spirit upon them, and charges them to forgive or retain sins. The sequence is important (wounds, breath, and forgiveness). The wounds in John have a special function because the side wound, unique to John's account, is part of the image of Jesus as the perfect passover lamb (cf. 19:31-37) and the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (cf. 1:29). Then, as God breathed God's own life into the mud creature of Genesis 2, now the spirit/breath blown on the disciples puts the life of the sacrificial lamb into them, and thus their lives, too, will work forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus' death had reconciled all the world beneath the cross (cf. 12:32-33). The disciples can expect their lives and deaths to function similarly. Moreover, throughout John's gospel, Jesus is the "sent" one, and now he sends the disciples even as he was sent, and for the same purpose, that the world might be saved, not condemned (cf. 3:17).
The Thomas episode is John's way of addressing a second or third generation of Christians who have not seen and yet are asked to believe. Thomas is the twin of all who were not there to see and touch Jesus. How shall the twins of Thomas see and touch the Lord from a long distance of space and time? It happens first of all in the community, and the sign once again is in the wounds. Now, however, the Spirit-enlivened community is the locus of the one with the wounded hands and side. It is among them that people can see, hear, and touch the risen Lord.

Third Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 2:14a, 36-47. Three thousand people of Israel join the disciples after hearing Peter's sermon, and they live communally.
2. 1 Peter 1:17-21. You are ransomed with the precious blood of Christ.

There are a number of related agendas in this text, all of which have connections to main thrusts of the Luke-Acts corpus. Like so many unique pieces of Lukan material, it is a story of travel and food, and like much of the other material in the gospels which reports the post-resurrection stories of Jesus' appearing, a central concern is the difficult set of questions facing the early church: Where is this risen Jesus, what is he doing, and how can we latter day disciples meet him?

Luke answers the first two questions most directly in the ascension story of Acts 1. Jesus has left the present time and space so as to be with God and to be Lord of all times and places. He will also come again. How can the present generation meet and know Jesus? Luke has a three-fold response to the question in Luke 24:13-35, and the answers come together in the meal at Emmaus: Disciples meet Jesus in strangers to whom they are hospitable, in the scriptures when properly interpreted, and in the community of the breaking of the bread.
Luke’s Jesus does a lot more eating than can be witnessed in the other gospels, and the purpose is generally to show how Jesus extended table-fellowship to sinners, Gentiles, and other assorted strangers and outsiders. In so doing he was both proclaiming and extending God’s reign, in which mercy over-rules justice. Here, in their hospitality to a stranger, the two Emmaus disciples find themselves brought into that mercy-regulated kingdom. This theme has ancient roots in the story of Abraham entertaining the three strangers in Genesis 18 and may be associated as well with the notion of entertaining angels unawares (Hebrews 13:2) or the judgment scene of Matthew 25 in which hospitality toward anyone is hospitality toward the son of man. The Lukan Jesus pops up in the strangest places.

After they recognize Jesus, the Emmaus disciples realize that their hearts had already begun to burn as they listened to this fellow expound the scriptures. The stranger had used a hermeneutic which assumes the necessity of a suffering, dying messiah. Here and in 24:44ff., Luke suggests that the Christ can be found in the scriptures, but only if the scriptures are read with that assumption. Presumably, if one reads the scriptures assuming that the messiah is to be a conqueror, magician, or anything else besides a sufferer, one will not find Jesus in them.

Finally, the recognition scene accompanies the fellowship of the breaking of the bread, a moment freighted with obvious eucharistic overtones. Luke’s response to the big question of our meeting the risen Lord in this latter day is therefore as follows: We will find and meet him in word and sacrament and in our care of strangers.

One of Luke’s dominant metaphors might be called "discipleship as journey." Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem is the central thematic feature of the whole middle section of Luke, and Jesus calls disciples to join him on that journey. Here, too, at the end of Luke’s gospel, the journey metaphor appears. Jesus’ journey had reached a fulfillment in Jerusalem, and he will eventually bid the disciples to stay there until they are authorized to go elsewhere. This Emmaus journey represents something of an unauthorized trip, and the two disciples must hasten back
to Jerusalem after they have met the risen Jesus and had their despair dispelled. Perhaps there is some good news in seeing Jesus not abandon those who go off on unauthorized journeys made in the midst of disappointment and fear. He will find them, walk with them, and in some stranger he will reveal himself.

Fourth Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 6:1-9; 7:2a, 51-60. Stephen is chosen as deacon, then is martyred for speaking prophetically against Israel.
2. 1 Peter 2:19-25. Jesus suffered as did the suffering servant of the Isaianic songs—redemptively.
3. John 10:1-10. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, come so that the flock might have the life more abundant.

Twin hazards attend the preaching task on this day, as it is both (in 1987) Mother’s Day and the annual Good Shepherd of the Really Dumb and Smelly Sheep Sunday. The former may not be a problem for people in this group, however, since anyone who would consider mentioning Mother’s Day in either the bulletin or the worship service is not allowed to attend the Institute of Liturgical Studies. The shepherd and sheep imagery is inescapable in all three lectionary cycles on Easter 4, however, which means that only people from Wyoming know what they are talking about.

There are more difficulties. First is the fact that the image is borrowed, like so much of John’s imagery, from Ezekiel (ch. 34), where the image is clearly political, as is shepherding imagery most everywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures. Second, in the first image (vv. 1-6), Jesus contrasts the sneaky stranger who climbs over the fence with the genuine shepherd who is recognized and comes in the front door. Presumably Jesus is the latter. However, the disciples did not understand that image (v. 6), so Jesus mixes his metaphors a bit and describes himself instead as the door as contrasted to a thief. By the time he gets back to being a shepherd again (v. 11), we have run out of pericope and have intruded upon cycle B’s Easter 4 lesson. Evidently we are to understand that this time the disciples caught on.
Who are the sheep-stealers who sneak over the fence? Pharisees? Herodians? Gnostics? Elitists? Fundamentalists? And even if real sheep will only follow the voice of the genuine shepherd, is the same true of people? Or aren't we woolly humans easily deceived by enticing strangers whose voices invite us toward real living so sneakily out of the television, the success manuals, our bottles, or synodical headquarters? How do you tell the difference between the incessant self-talk that goes on inside us and the voice of God or the genuine shepherd? A Calvinist reading would help resolve this easily. Any sheep who is fooled was not really a sheep of the flock in the first place and belongs with the sneaky stranger. But history suggests that even the good sheep of the true flock of the genuine shepherd can be tricked, led away to some inviting pasture, and clipped.

John does offer a way to begin distinguishing among the voices, however. The thief ultimately kills, while the true shepherd gives abundant life. We must borrow from next year's lesson (vv. 11-13 at least) to help with that distinction. The thief is really interested only in his or her own life and profit. The true shepherd, on the other hand, gives his or her life for the sake of the sheep, so that they might live. "Abundant life" (zoe perisson) is life overflowing all boundaries. It is distinct from bios "life." Humankind shares bios with all living things, but only God's breath gives zoe. And that is now given only by the shepherd who has given his life for the sheep (cf. John 20:19ff.).

A troubling thought about this traditionally precious metaphor comes to mind when one ponders the realities of shepherding and sheep. Shepherds tend flocks for their own sakes, not the sheep's. Sheep are kept for shearing, selling, butchering, and eating. There is a time for protecting, nurturing, and even perhaps for playing with the little ones, the lambs, and laughing at how innocent they are in their youthful awkwardness. The shepherd might love the sheep and call them by name. But finally comes the day for butchering. A lamb must be sacrificed. One of the sheep must be tonight's meal. Is it stretching the analogy too far to raise that reality? Is it possible that the church is a flock being led like sheep to the shearer and to slaughter, and the leading is done not by
thieves but by God? Could it be that the good shepherd would have the world clothed with the very fibers off the Christian's hide? Could it be that God would sacrifice one from the flock to feed the world's starved? And could it be that such is the way to zoe, and the shepherd who promises no shearing, no suffering, no death, no cross, that shepherd is a thief because that one offers us only bios, our hide in one piece, saved, but saved for what?

John's "good shepherd," Jesus, is also the lamb sacrificed for the Passover. To follow that shepherd is to go the way of the cross. But the lamb's trek ends not at Calvary, or in the tomb, or even risen and showing off the Passover wounds to the astonished disciples, but at the Lamb's High Feast.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

2. 1 Peter 2:4-10. Jesus is the cornerstone and stumbling block, the people are the Hosean chosen ones, "my people" and "dearly loved."
3. John 14:1-12. Jesus speaks of departing to be with the Father, and promises the disciples that they are "in the Father" even as Jesus will be.

This Sunday's gospel lesson as well as the remaining two in the Easter season all come from the Johannine discourses set at the last supper recounted in John. Consequently, all of them in one way or another have as their concern the struggles which the absence of Jesus and God cause for the Christian community. Jesus has said plainly in John 13 that one of them will betray him, another will deny him, and he will be gone to a place where they cannot come, at least for now.

Several features of this Sunday's lesson suggest images suitable for building a sermon. The first is in Jesus' opening sentence, "Let not your hearts be troubled." Given the circumstances, such a pronouncement is much like those which angels invariably make in the scriptures when they appear suddenly to frighten frail old priests, simple young maidens, and garden-variety shepherds half out of
their wits: "Do not fear!" Right, angel. In the case of John 14, Jesus himself is sorely troubled (13:21) as he speaks to the disciples of the traitor and the denier and his own impending death. Nor was this the first time in John when Jesus was "troubled." In 12:27 he speaks openly of being troubled at the prospect of finally facing his "hour." How could the disciples not be troubled?

Indeed, perhaps they should be troubled. John 5:1-9 tells the story of the healing of a paralytic at the pool of Bethzatha, where healings occurred only when the waters were "troubled." And when Jesus himself is "deeply moved in spirit and troubled" upon arrival at Bethany to find Lazarus dead (11:33), the upshot of that troubling is ultimately the raising of Lazarus. There is something healing and salvific about being troubled, it seems, at least when Jesus is troubled in John's story. Yet, Jesus tells them not to let their hearts be troubled. Perhaps the clue for us is in the subsequent promises of Jesus that he and the Father will abide in the disciples, that the Spirit will take up residence in them, and finally in Jesus' breathing upon the disciples in the post-resurrection scene. The troubled heart and spirit which abides in the heart of a disciple is no longer merely his or her own heart, but the restless, troubled, healing, reconciling, saving heart and spirit of God and Christ. When our hearts are troubled now, that is really God's holy trouble, and God will use it to bring healing to another whose numbed heart and flagging spirits need exciting.

A second image which proves useful is the image of "place" in Jesus' statement that he is leaving so as "to prepare a place for you" (vv. 2, 3). The places promised are said to be "abiding places" (monoi, v. 2), and one thinks first of some out-of-this-world, heavenly places. That is too quick a leap, however, for John. For one thing, the "Father's house" is first of all temple language, and temple language is really about the presence of God in the world. Jesus' contemporaries thought of God as present chiefly in the Jerusalem temple, and in John 4:16-26 Jesus discusses the places where God is thought to be present and promises that there will be many such places before long. Furthermore, after Jesus' promise in John 14:2, there are still some strictly this-worldly
places to which he will go on ahead of the disciples. Shortly there will be the place that Judas knew (18:2), the place of betrayal; the place called the Place of a Skull (19:17); and finally the place where they laid him (19:41), dead. Those places, too, Jesus prepared ahead of time for the disciples by going there before them, so that we might say also what Luther once said concerning the descensus phrase in the Creed: "That Jesus descended means that there is no place that I can go, even to hell, where even there he is not Lord for me." All these dread places are made "abiding places," places where God is not absent. And how does God become present in such places? When you are in those places, God will not allow you to be there without others who have known betrayal, death, and hell. And when others plunge into those deep places, you are there, God's arms to hold them, God's broken heart to beat for them, God's quiet spirit-breath to comfort them.

Finally, the composite image in Jesus' statement, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (v. 6), is potentially useful, though it is surely a dangerous and difficult text because it is so easily read as grounds for ugly Christian exclusivism and chauvinism. The near audaciousness of such a statement on Jesus' lips is understandable only when one recalls that both Jesus and John were Jews, and at the heart of Jewish faith and identity was the notion that Israel was God's last hope for the world. That is the point of the primal history in Genesis, characterized by the series of escalating wrongs and equally dreadful curses, and ending as it does when God decides that curse does not work. God will try blessing instead, so God chooses and commissions Abram and Sarai, promises that through them all families of the earth will be blessed, and pins his last hope for the creation on them and their mission. If blessing does not work, that will be the end for the creation.

To Abram's seed God gives the torah, specifically for the purpose of teaching Israel how blessing rather than curse can be worked in the world. Torah teaches that the secret of it all is to love God with the whole heart and the neighbor as oneself. The myriad of laws and statutes which grew up around that core, written in the Pentateuch, Talmud, Mishnah, and elsewhere, are really nothing more than what Jews call halakah, in English "way." All those
rules which Christians poke fun at for being legalistic and silly are really the attempt to discover the way to love God and neighbor and in the process bring blessing to the earth instead of curse. That is, they are the way to get God’s dreams fulfilled in the creation.

For John to have Jesus say “I am the way” was really to say something to the effect that Jesus embodied the fulfillment of God’s dreams. If you wish to see how blessing is wrought in the earth, look at that one, see how he treated others, see how curse is rendered impotent in his words and actions. In the context of John 14 and the farewell discourses in general, treating as they do the problem of God’s absence and the community’s life without the presence of Christ, the message is that God is present in those who would follow “the way,” who would obey the new love commandment given on the night when Jesus was betrayed (13:34-35). If Philip could only follow that way, he could see the Father (14:8-11). The Father is there to be seen, Jesus means to say, but you must know where to look. And strangely enough, if Philip could only take Jesus seriously, he might start by looking in the mirror some morning and looking at what he saw the way God does.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

2. 1 Peter 3:15-22. Baptism is like the Noachic flood—it cleanses.
3. John 14:15-21. Jesus will not leave the disciples “orphaned.” He will send the Counselor, and he will be present in the love of the community for one another and world.

This Sunday’s gospel lesson is concerned with the same basic problem facing the Christian community as was discussed above in the treatment of John 14:1-12. Two closely associated images appear in this text, however, which invite the preacher to think along some paths different from those suggested by the previous Sunday’s lesson. The images are those of being orphaned, and of being held in the comforting arms of a mother.
Jesus says to the disciples in v. 18, "I will not leave you orphanous" (RSV: "desolate"). Little comment is necessary. The image of the disciples as orphaned by Jesus' departure is easy enough to understand. To comfort and encourage them, Jesus promises the disciples that he will ask the Father to send the Parakletos, which is variously translated as "the Comforter" or "the Counselor." The fourth gospel's predilection for multivalence suggests that both images were intended, and indeed both are entirely appropriate. The Counselor is a figure in Jewish apocalyptic's picture of the great trial at which the faithful will one day stand as defendants. The prosecuting attorney at the trial is Satan, whose task is to cite evidence before God, the Judge, that this person is not among the faithful and is worthy of damnation. Satan needs only to reveal the truth about the defendant. The Counselor or defense attorney speaks truly also, however, and reminds God of the defendant's true lineage. He or she is the child and heir of God. This image was important in the life of the early church because in times of persecution and fragmenting of the community, it was easy enough for people to believe themselves orphaned, abandoned and without legitimate identity. Jewish Christians such as those in John's original audience would have been particularly vulnerable to such feelings. They thought they were being entirely faithful to the traditions of Judaism, to their spiritual "family," but they were rejected and willfully orphaned by their fathers and mothers in the faith. At least, so it seemed to them and so it seems today to all who believe themselves expelled from the fellowship despite their faithfulness.

Parakletos and its verbal forms are also the Greek translation for the words of "comfort" in the Hebrew scriptures. The basic meaning of the Hebrew verb "to comfort" (nhm) is "to pant rhythmically," and the original context of the verb's use is in speaking of childbirth. By extension, the word comes to mean holding a child so that the child can feel the rhythm of the mother's breathing, the rhythm of her body. Hence, Jesus promises his about-to-be-left-behind disciples that one will come and hold them so that they can feel God the Mother's breath warmly on the backs of their necks as she holds them tightly to her breast. They will not be alone, orphaned.
In practical terms, the work of the defense attorney and the mothering Spirit of God occur when disciples obey the commandment to love one another in the way that Jesus had loved them. Jesus abides in such ones, as does God, and though the world cannot see God's presence, the disciples have eyes which can see God in the loving which is given them.

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

1. Acts 1:(1-7) 8-14. Jesus ascends into heaven, and the disciples return to Jerusalem to await the promise of the spirit.

2. 1 Peter 4:12-17; 5:6-11. Do not be surprised at sufferings and persecutions. Rest your hope in the God who raised Jesus.


The so-called "high-priestly prayer" of Jesus in John 17 is to some extent a commentary on the Our Father, the text of which appears nowhere in John. For a variety of reasons, John did not report Jesus' baptism or the bread and cup version of the last supper, either, but John found ways to teach the sacraments in his gospel. Jesus taught Nicodemus about baptism (John 3), and he taught some folks who gathered after the feeding of the five thousand, a group which included Zwingli, it seems, but not Luther, about the Lord's Supper (John 6). Likewise, John teaches the Our Father without actually presenting the text of the prayer.

John follows Mark's lead in this regard. Mark did not cite the text of the Our Father but suggested the locus for praying it in the Gethsemane pericope of his Passion Narrative. Jesus tells the disciples that he is "greatly distressed and troubled" and then he goes off to pray, "Abba, Father . . . thy will be done" (Mark 14:32-36). John's Passion Narrative has no Gethsemane pericope partly because Jesus is in complete control of the passion events. No one takes his life from him; he lays it down of his own accord (cf. 10:18). Earlier, however, when the arrival of some Greeks at the Passover causes Jesus to see
that "the hour has come" (12:23), Jesus tells the disciples "Now is my soul troubled," and he goes on to pray, "Father, glorify thy name" (12:27-28). This is the func­tional equivalent of "Hallowed be thy name." The praying one requests that God's reputation as the God whose ultimate will is mercy would be furthered by the praying one's life and action. The New Testament consistently locates that prayer in the situation when battle rages between survival instincts and the spirit of sacrificial love. (Cf., e.g., Romans 8:9-25).

In John 17, Jesus, having already prayed the Abba prayer on his own behalf back in chapter 12, proceeds to pray it in effect on behalf of his disciples. Jesus' prayer is that God's name would be glorified not only through him, but also by the lives and actions of the disciples. Jesus has glorified God and manifested God's name (17:6), but now the disciples must do so. They must live out a kind of unity which allows the world to see God as truly in them as the disciples themselves have been able to see God truly in Jesus.

That is a heavy burden to bear for disciples then and now, to think that all the world might ever see of God is in our behavior. What a mess we make of God's name with our fighting amongst ourselves and our disregard for unity and for what the world thinks of the God whom we image. We have in recent days seen all too vivid a set of examples of how the church's imaging of God for the world does indeed have power, even when the image is negative and blasphemous. When Oral Roberts imaged God as some kind of gangster or extortioner ("Raise $8 million or I'll kill you"), or when Jim and Tammy Bakker imaged God as the cartoon hero of a religious theme park and then made a joke of God with their own shameless greed, it was really God's name which suffered most. Few of us have made God so obvious a laughingstock as has occurred in these public examples, but the long-term effect of whatever disunity among Christians which derives from our unquenchable thirst for our own rightness is surely just as blasphemous. We image to the world a God who is no more than a petty tyrant, an unfeeling logic-chopper, or a remote snob. With church growth principles we image God as the ultimate MBA who is much more interested in marketing strategies, spread sheets, and bottom lines than in the
broken hearts and wasted lives strewn about the creation, the human refuse, in some cases, of the upscale church.

The good news? John’s gospel proclaims that by his death, Jesus drew all people to himself (12:32-33), and Jesus himself declares "It worked!" as he dies in John (19:30). He had got them all together, sure enough, beneath that cross. There is ultimate unity. It is a given. But among us it is still abuilding. And if indeed Jesus prayed a form of the Our Father in John 17, then we might say of the unity which we both desire and resist, "It will come indeed without our prayer, of itself; but we pray that it may come unto us also."