

Surface and Depth

Sermon for Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Readings: Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10: 40-43; John 20 1-18

Sermon text: Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” 20:17

All things have both a surface and a depth. There’s material and the spiritual reality—not two different worlds, one real, the other imaginary, but the one understood in its depth, its meaning. There’s body and mind, body and together they make up a soul. There are stories about events and people in history and interpretations of those stories. I think most of the time we perceive and remain focused on the surface of things, and for most of the stories grasp only the plot, the action and do not linger much over the deeper meaning—our lives too. And perhaps this is becoming more pronounced nowadays, as we spend more time on screens—which after all are a kind of surface and a kind of filter. But I invite us to spend a few moments this morning going behind the screen, into the depths, of the story of Easter.

You know the story—you heard it as a kid. How Jesus of Nazareth was born of Mary, baptized by John, taught and healed in Galilee, called together a ragtag group of followers, and was acclaimed as the messiah when he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. How he was betrayed by Judas one of his followers, and arrested, tried on false charges, beaten, humiliated and killed on a cross by the order of the roman governor Pilate. They put his dead body in the tomb of Nicodemus on Friday before sunset but the women in the group of followers came to the tomb at dawn of the third day, Sunday, and found it empty.

Thus far all the accounts agree. Mark’s account, at least in the earliest copies we have, ends there, with the women fleeing the scene in amazement and fear. Matthew tells stories about the appearance of angels, earthquakes opening graves, the dead appearing but Jesus appear only at the end on a mountain top, a story Luke and Paul also tell. Luke also tells the story of two followers encountering a stranger who discloses to them the true meaning of scripture about the messiah and is revealed in the breaking of bread. John tells the story we just heard—another story in which the identity of Jesus is not apparent at first, as well as a story about him appearing to the disciples in a locked room later on Sunday, and again a week later so Thomas could witness. All of these stories has elements in common—including a sort of shimmering change in Jesus’

appearance, but also a continuity—something in his voice, his manner of blessing, his wounds. He eats—no ghost—and he has some fun.

Jesus kind of plays with Mary a bit—who are you looking for? he asks. As if he is indeed someone working in the cemetery, a gardener perhaps. Seeing her—his close friend, the sister of Lazarus, as some interpretations understand, one whom he healed and who in turn loved him, staying by his side, coming to the tomb—he then comes clean. Mary, he says—and she knows then it is him. Reaching out she clasps his hand—she who had bathed his feet with perfumed oil and her tears.

This moment is depicted in the magnificent window we recently conserved and turned to face Franklin Ave and light up at night—the moment when Jesus tells Mary, h you cannot hold on to me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father.

What a beautiful and tender moment as depicted n our window—unlike in most others I have seen, where Jesus is rather stern and scolding and mary crouches somewhat cowering. Here they are equals, standing side by side, holding hands, as if a married couple or close friends parting.

And this of course is part of the depth of the story—for our window is given in memory of John and Adelaide Wing, married fifty years and parted by death a year a part, he is 1910, she in 1911—and the children then commission this window from the great Maitland Armstrong and his daughter Helen—and this scene is decided upon, the work done and window dedicated on Easter Sunday 1912. One hundred and 12 years ago more or less today.

The depth I allude to here is not the possibility that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were more than friends —of course we all have heard these stories the Da Vici code, The Last Temptation—and it is tempting to imagine, as some early Christians did, that Mary was let in on deeper secrets of spiritual life than the others, as in the so called gnostic gospels of Mary and Thomas. It is always a temptation to speculate—but personally I prefer the orthodox version, where they are but close friends, still teacher and disciple. Nevertheless she is called now in all the churches “the apostle to the apostle,” the first witness, and more and more, as scholars unearth the hidden stories of the women in the Bible, she is recognized as the equal of Peter in stature among the disciples—the Tower to his Rock.

But I caution against interpretations of the gospel that divide the surface from the depths—as if the surface is an illusion which true adepts realize is only there to fool the rubes—while the true knowers, the spiritual elite have secret knowledge. I think the surface story is true too—these things happened, although people of course struggled to understand, and to capture the mysterious ways in which the new creation of God in Christ erupted into and still interpenetrates the old.

And this is what I would like to leave you with today—the idea that there are levels of creation—just as God the Source and Creator set this universe in motion, called it into being in the beginning—*creatio ab initio et ex nihilo*—so that we can see at least to some extent—and increasingly through science—how it unfolds as material cause and effect. But God also continually sustains and enlivens creation—*creatio continuo*, creation as original freshness as the theologians say—for in God as capital B Being we live and move and have our limited being. And God in Christ on Easter Day showed us a new creation—*creatio novum*—Paul’s word for the new reality come into being with Christ, a redemption or liberation of this one—a new and elusive reality, both coming and already in seed and first fruits here. And this Easter season—fifty days from today through Ascension through Pentecost—is a symbol of this new creation, after which we go back, symbolically, to ordinary time—in which the Spirit helps leads us into that day to day kingdom work we are called to do. But this season is tender and passing, the blush of spring, as when Jesus and Mary held hands—touching, but but not to be grasped—for Jesus is ascending to the Father, we can’t hold on. But we can always remember the moment, the feeling—and we can see now in the world around us, if we look a little askance, if we spend time contemplating the depths that Jesus is still appearing in unexpected places, in unlikely looking faces, speaking in both in inner and outer voices. On the surface but even more in the depths—in our hearts we hear and with our tongues proclaim, Christ is risen, Alleluia, he is risen indeed, Alleluia.

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