

Children of God

1 John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36-48

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Christianity is the only major religion whose founder suffered a violent death. You have probably heard me say that in other sermons, but it's worth repeating because we all too often lose sight of that fact. Christians tend to focus so much on the resurrection, to the extent that some might say the true affirmation of Christian faith is not that he died but that he was resurrected. As if the death is just a stepping stone to the really important part: he is risen!

Certainly the resurrection is important. I believe in it with all my heart. It's central to my Christian faith. Yet I don't really know what it is. God forbid anybody try to make me pin down a definition!

I remember a conversation I had years ago with a recovering Baptist who had become UCC. She kept asking me, "Do you believe Jesus bodily rose from the dead?" And I gave what I would characterize as the typical UCC answer: "well, the disciples had an experience... and they called it resurrection..." And she said, "But do you believe Jesus bodily rose from the dead? And I said, "Well, I believe in the resurrection, but I don't claim to know what actually happened that day, blah, blah, blah." And she said again, "So. Do. You. Believe. Jesus. Bodily. Rose. From. The. Dead?" And I finally had to say, "Look, I can't even answer that question because I don't know what it means." I was really and truly not trying to be coy or evasive. I do totally believe in the resurrection, but I'm perfectly content to leave the scientific details up to God. In fact, if we get caught up in the scientific details, I think it means we're missing the point. The point isn't that a corpse got up and breathed again two thousand years ago. The point is that the risen Christ is Lord of my life today. That sounds impressive, doesn't it? Very seminarian. Lovely!....So what the heck does it mean?

It's something I still really struggle to articulate, and I doubt I'm going to succeed here. I still can't really talk about what happened two thousand years ago. I can only talk about what it means, and what is happening now because of it. For some people, that's not enough. Well, as Paul says, we have to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling. I daresay that my understanding of the resurrection will continue to evolve and change and deepen throughout my life. That's fine. So here's what's in my mind these days.

We have this wonderful little resurrection story. It's not very flashy or dramatic compared to some of the other ones, like Mary in the garden, or Doubting Thomas or the road to Emmaus, or...well, almost any other one. Instead, we have the boys hiding out in a room. Here's why Jesus' death is so important. They've already heard the report of the resurrection, but as far as they're concerned, it's nonsense. They don't know what it means any more than I do today. All they know is, Jesus was brutally murdered by the government. They know that they had abandoned him in his hour of need and were now hiding because they were afraid it would happen to them too. It's easy to see them as cowards, but these guys had given up a lot to follow Jesus: gave up their jobs, left their homes, parted from their families. They may not have fully understood what Jesus was all about, but they believed in him. And now he had been murdered. That was the end of it, all the wonderful things they had experienced with Jesus, all the hopes they'd had. It all seemed to be over now. They were probably even wondering if Jesus' death had been a punishment from God. After all, if Jesus truly had been the Messiah, God would have kept him safe, right? Or rescued him? Or stopped the Romans? God has that power, so why didn't God use it on Jesus' behalf?

Now suddenly Jesus appears to them. The door is locked, yet he is there. Naturally they think he's a ghost. And what is a ghost? It is a specter, a soul, almost always one who has been wronged, who has unresolved issues and so can't quite quit this earthly plane and move on to the afterlife. A ghost is a discontented spirit. They fear that Jesus is coming to haunt them, because they had betrayed him, abandoned him, doubted him. That's generally why ghosts haunt us, isn't it?

Yet Jesus says, "Why are you frightened? Why do you have doubts? Touch me and see." He shows them his hands and feet – specifically. In doing so, he shows them his wounds, the marks of crucifixion. This is important. Again, I'd never attempt to explain it scientifically, but what it means is this: Jesus was not a ghost. His resurrection is not merely spiritual; it is also physical. Jesus has flesh and bones. It means that the resurrection is about this world, this plane of existence, these physical bodies that we all have.

But if it's physical, it's still not quite like the bodies we have now. Jesus doesn't have to walk anymore to get around; he can "apparate." And he doesn't look the same, either. Mary didn't recognize him when she first saw him. Even in this story, it's not Jesus' face that the disciples recognize, it's the wounds of the crucifixion. So it's not enough to say simply that Jesus bodily rose from the dead. He's not a reanimated corpse, which is what Lazarus was. The resurrected Lazarus was a human body that would die again. Jesus is something different. There is sameness, but also difference. There is a now, and a not yet.

Those wounds are also important because they show that Jesus' death hasn't been erased or cancelled out. He had gone through death. He had really and truly died, which is still something that can be hard to believe. I've read theories about how Jesus faked his own death in order to appear to be resurrected. But that really doesn't make any sense to me. Why in the world would someone do that? What would be the point? A glorified parlor trick?

As further proof of his physicality, Jesus eats with them, which if you know your Harry Potter, ghosts can't do, and if you know your gospels you know that eating, especially bread or fish, is spiritually significant. He basically has communion with them, as in the story of the disciples in Emmaus. Then, as also in that story, Jesus has an after-dinner Bible study, showing them that the Messiah would experience suffering and death, and not get rescued from it by God, but rather be vindicated by God in the end.

Dinner and a Bible study is not as exciting as a resurrection in any form, but now we're getting to the really, really important part. Not just the "what happened then" part, and even more than the "what does it mean" bit. Now we are moving on to the "what happens now" business. And to explore that, let's jump over to 1 John.

It was this passage that really stuck in my brain this week. At first it may not seem to have anything to do with the resurrection, but I think it has *everything* to do with it, and as you listen to it again, keep in mind how those disciples reacted to the risen Jesus, the questions and doubts they must have had. These people who didn't really understand Jesus, who had betrayed and abandoned him, who doubted his mission and feared that they would die like he did. In other words, people who were just like us. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is."

The rest of the passage talks about sin. I don't fully understand it, yet it is also important, because what are we but wretched sinners? We screw up all the time. Who among us here can really claim that we'd have done it better than the

disciples? How we hurt and betray one another! How we abandon our loved ones in their hour of need! How we don't even try to understand each other, too enamored of our own view of things. How cowardly we are, fearing to stick our necks out lest we get our heads chopped off. Those Beatitudes? They're embarrassing, because they sure don't describe us! Oh, we have our good moments, times when we did the right thing, when we can say, "I was a true Christian then." But we also have our sinful, lawless moments, when we are capable of such cruelty, such violence and hatred that we can't even admit it to ourselves much less bear the thought that God knows. But God does know. God knows our inmost hearts. God knows the foulness that lurks inside us. Oh yes, God knows. God knows as completely as God knows the marks of the crucifixion on Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus holds out his hands and says, "See? You see this?" And we cringe, because we all in our own ways great and small, but all cruel – we all have placed a role in putting those marks there. Whatever horrible thing we've done to one another, we did it also to Jesus. And Jesus holds this incriminating evidence out to us. "See? Touch and see! See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." No wonder the disciples were so afraid! We should be too. How can we be children of God? We're children of the devil! All the horrible things we've said and done? And Jesus says, "Baby, you think I don't know all that? But why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your heart? See what love the Father has given us. Beloved, we are God's children now."

How can this be so, we ask ourselves. We don't understand it. Is Jesus a ghost or a physical body? What is the resurrection? Who are we now because of it? We don't know. But John assures us, "We are God's children now: what we will be has not yet been revealed." (See, John can do the dodge too! But his answer is not compromised because of it.) "What we do know is this," he says, "when Christ is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is." A spiritual body, a physical body – whatever. As he is: the crucified One, murdered by our own capacity for evil. Not rescued from death, but having experienced it, and then the One whom God has raised to new life. As he is. And we will be like him. How? John says, "All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." He goes on with this stuff about sin and lawlessness, that I don't quite understand, but this is the part that I sort of get. John says, "No one who abides in Christ sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as Christ is righteous."

What does this mean? Because we all still sin. Oh, yes! So does this mean we aren't in Christ? No. One of my sources had a quote from Dostoevsky's *Resurrection from the Underground*, and this helped me understand. (Those of you who took my Girardian theology class, this is pure Girard.) "What seems to you to be evil in you is purified by the mere fact of having noticed it.... At the moment when you see with terror that, in spite of your efforts, not only have you not drawn closer to your goal, but you have even drawn further away from it, at that moment, I warn you beforehand, you will reach your goal, and you will see above you the mysterious power of the Lord, who, unbeknownst to you, has guided you with love."

Yes, we still sin. Because we have these mortal, imperfect bodies. But because of Christ we know when we are sinning, and that truth will set us free. We know when we fail to live up to our calling, and knowing that moves us farther away from that sin and closer to what we are: children of God.

How is it that people are able to keep sinning? It's because they're in denial. They're lying to themselves. They convince themselves that they're really doing something good. But when we look – when we really touch and see those nail marks in Jesus' hands and feet, we can't deny it anymore. We know that we sin. Yet we also know how much God loves us. That we are children of God. That's what we are now. What we will be has not yet been revealed. Angels? Saints? Sinless? Perfect? We don't know. What we do know is this: when Christ is revealed, when the veil is stripped away and our lies

exposed, then we will be like him, for we will see him as he is: the One who loves and forgives those who killed him. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

Was Jesus raised from the dead? Oh yes, he was. And I know it, not because of some physical body, some resuscitated corpse. I know because despite my crucifying him, those marks are the sign of what love the Father has given me.