
What Resurrec-conciliation Looks Like

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Easter 2 – Year C

In the name of God: “Our Maker, Defender, Redeemer, and Friend.” Amen. —*The Hymnal*, 388, v.5

Well here I go again! As many of us here today know I collect religion jokes for my college religion classes. Of course jokes are especially useful at this time of year, to lighten things up when it’s the end of the semester, and we’re all exhausted from week after week of classes and course work. But at this point I’ve run out of new jokes to tell! And even my students seem too fatigued to provide me with new jokes to tell! That’s why I was pleased this week, while I was preparing to preach this Sunday’s Easter readings, to rediscover some of my favorite type of religion jokes. It’s those children’s jokes where the child outsmarts the adult who’s trying to indoctrinate or dominate them; you know, make them “get religion” or “become moral” in some way. These jokes make me want to shout for victory when the child gets to have the last word in the joke. Then he or she can break free of the adult’s peculiar version of religious authority, or push back against the adult’s assertion of their own personal authority. Here’s a typical example.

School children were lining up in the cafeteria of a Catholic elementary school for lunch. At the head of the lunch table was a large pile of apples. At that end of the table one of the teachers had written a note and posted it on the tray of apples. The note said:

“Take only ONE. God is watching.”

Moving further along the lunch line, at the other end of the table was a large tray of chocolate chip cookies. And on that tray a child had written this note:

“Take all you want. God is watching the apples.”

That’s right: take all the cookies you want because God is paying attention to the apples at the other end of the table! So instead of learning the lesson that God watches everything you do the child learned how to outsmart the God-system that was being set-up by the adult. If you’ll allow me a play on words: the child uses the adult’s own point of view to “turns the tables” on the adult. But I like to think about it this way. I like to think that the child’s point of view was exposing the adult’s ill-conceived point of view. At a more discerning level it’s as if to say, “Are you really asking us to believe in a God who keeps watching everything we do like that? Is that really the kind of God you’re inviting us to believe-in here?” And it’s as if the child-spirit is calling the adult “out,” as we sometimes say; “calling someone out” or critically challenging something they represent in a given situation.

Now here’s an example where it’s the adult’s personal assertion of righteousness that the child challenges with a clever remark. It’s a kind of super-righteousness that gets challenged by the child getting to have the last word.

One day a child was sitting and watching a parent do the dishes at the kitchen sink. The child suddenly noticed that the parent had several strands of white hair sticking out in contrast to the other hairs that were darker. With great curiosity the child exclaimed to the parent,

“Why are some of your hairs white?”

And the parent replied, “Well, dear, every time you do something wrong, or make me cry or unhappy, one of my hairs turns white.”

The child thought about this revelation for a while and then said,

“Is that what happened when you were a kid like me, and then ALL of grandma’s hairs turned white?”

Right on! In this case the adult’s assertion of personal righteousness is masquerading as a supernatural or even god-like righteousness. It’s as if we adults, or especially we parents, participate in some kind of super-power that knows every time our children do something wrong. That secret power can even react with a visible sign whenever the child hurts our parental feelings. Well, all that kind of self-righteousness gets punctured by the child’s clever conclusion; the conclusion that adults too must have caused lots of hairs to turn white on their own parents’ dear heads.

Well, we can’t go on and on like this, telling example after example of child-spirit outwitting adult self-righteousness or super piety. So let me cut to the chase with one last example. This example, by the way, connects more directly to our scriptures appointed for this second of Easter. You’ve likely heard this one before (maybe told even by me) but it can sustain retelling.

A kindergarten teacher was observing a classroom of children while they were drawing. The teacher would occasionally walk around to see each child’s work as they were drawing at their desk.

As the teacher reached the desk of one child who was working diligently, the teacher asked what the drawing was. The child replied,

“I’m drawing God.”

The teacher paused and said,

“But no one knows what God looks like.”

Without missing a beat, or looking up from her drawing, the child replied,

“They will in a minute!” [4/1/2016: www.psywww.com/psyrelig/webjokes/wisdom.html]

Yeah. “No one knows what God looks like BUT they will in a minute if you’ll just step back,” as if to say. “Just trust the process,” as if to say; “Step out of the way and let this happen.”

Well here’s the connection to our gospel for today; a connection to Jesus’ resurrection appearances before his disciples that we hear about today. In fact there are three connections precisely at those three points where Jesus appears before his disciples and says the same thing each time. Each time the first thing he says to them is: “Peace be with you.” “Peace be with you,” he reiterates. Now “what’s up with that?”—as we say nowadays. Is “Peace be with you” just a good introductory expression? Is it like us Episcopalians, when we introduce our prayers with the customary phrase, “The Lord be with you?” Or is there something more to Jesus repeating that phrase and repeatedly bestowing peaceable-ness on his disciples?

Now I took up that question with one of my colleagues and here’s what we discovered. These Easter appearances of the risen Jesus are the only occasions when he uses that expression, “Peace be with you.” And he uses it only in Luke’s gospel and in the gospel of John that we read today. But nowhere does he use it before he appears alive again after the crucifixion. It’s as if there’s something about the death and resurrection creates a new form of messianic speech that Jesus then employs with his disciples. What could that something be? Well, my colleague and I have concluded that it’s because what the disciples are really most in need of after Jesus’ death and resurrection is their own forgiveness and reconciliation before God and themselves.

[Jesus’] disciples who had abandoned him and denied him are sitting in a locked room, grief-stricken, afraid, and feeling guilty as sin ... [We can imagine that Jesus would have] sacked the whole lot of them. We [would] have fired them — [saying] “You good-for-nothing, fair-weather friends, you failed me! I never want to see you again! Now that I’m risen I’m going to get myself some new disciples, some real disciples, someone who will follow me through thick and thin.” ... But not Jesus! ... Not only does he not sack the sorry lot of them; not only does he not return for vengeance; not only does he

come instead with peace; but he hires them to go out into the world extending the word of forgiveness to others!! And, some time later, when Jesus goes out to hire the person he wants to take this message of forgiveness to the ends of the earth, he hires Saul, one who is guilty of killing some of Jesus' first messengers. ... To spread a message of forgiveness, he hires not those who appear blameless or somehow most worthy. *He hires those who truly know that they themselves have been forgiven* ... the job description for being a disciple of Jesus ... [involves] knowing how much you are forgiven ...

And here, my colleague concludes:

Not only that ... [Jesus asks] us to extend this word of healing, life-giving forgiveness to others [when he says]: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." Oh, yes, there's also this second part about, "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But after you yourself have had your sins forgiven, could you really retain the sins of another? You see? Jesus has hired the right people, after all ... [4/1/2016 <http://girardianlectionary.net/reflections/year-c/easter2c/>]

So that's how one of my colleagues answers the question of why the risen Jesus repeatedly bestows peace on his fearful and remorseful disciples. But one more thing. The third time he says "Peace be with you" is when he's confronting that particular disciple, Thomas. We always assume, by the way, that the focus of Thomas's doubt about Jesus' resurrection was the same as our own scientific skepticism about the impossibility of resurrection from the dead. And sure, that was likely part of Thomas's doubt too. But I suggest that Thomas was also expressing the point of view of the teacher in that last little story that I told a few minutes ago. From that point of view—the view that "No one knows what God looks like"—what Thomas might be similarly saying is, "No one knows what a resurrected body looks like." And what if Jesus' response is like that of the child in that story, but instead of drawing a picture in this case Jesus says,

"Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27).

It's as if to say, "My wounds are the answer to your doubt; so experience my wounds and believe."

Christian friends, I wonder if our forgiven sins are like the wounds on the body of the risen Jesus that the disciples experience in our gospel today. These are the places in our lives where we have experienced renewed relationship to God and to others in direct contradiction to our violations and transgressions against God and others. It's the places where we have experienced the divine pardon—a holy word saying to us the equivalent of "Peace be with you" in the face of our own betrayals and abandonment of what is holy and loving. It is precisely in those places that a new ministry and covenant of reconciliation to God and others is being offered to us by believing in the power of the risen Christ to forgive sins and to authorize us to do the same.

And so, Christian friends, we get to realize that we know what resurrection and reconciliation look like. We know not because we have seen that risen body, however. It's because we have become His body alive and active in the world today. We are that living fellowship of those who are duly authorized to bestow forgiveness and pronounce divine reconciliation on others. But we have this privilege—and, indeed, calling and responsibility—because we ourselves have been forgiven and divinely reconciled with God and others. And the proof of our reconciliation is that we are still being able, while alive in this world and in these bodies, to recount and show to others the wounds of our most abysmal sins, failings, shortcomings and violations of love and compassion and care.

"From now on," he the apostle Paul declared his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

From now on ... if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:16-21).

And so it is on the basis of that gift of righteousness, and not our own self-righteousness, that we pray the Collect appointed for this Second Sunday of Easter:

The Lord be with you ...

Let us pray ...

The Collect of the Day

Almighty and everlasting God, who in the Paschal mystery established the new covenant of reconciliation: Grant that all who have been reborn into the fellowship of Christ's Body may show forth in their lives what they profess by their faith; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

[4/1/2016 www.lectionarypage.net/YearC_RCL/Easter/CEaster2_RCL.html]

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