
Easter Faith as Embodied Love

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

I don't know about you, but I suspect you wake up most mornings like I do. This is the way the Sufi poet Rumi describes it. He wrote:

Today, like every other day,
we wake up empty and frightened.

Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
Take down a musical instrument.

Let the beauty we love be what we do.
There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

So when I wake up most mornings, empty and frightened, I try not to start working right away, but instead start loving, 'letting the beauty I love be what I do,' and finding one out of the 'hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.'

Two of the ways I can get 'grounded in love,' first thing in morning, are by kissing my beloved wife, Bethann, and then by offering a holy kiss to my Lord Jesus—in prayer and meditation.

In today's gospel reading, the resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples, who were "empty and frightened" while still hiding on that first Easter evening, and he offers to ground them in his physical reality in two ways:

he showed them his hands and his side
[and saying to] them again, "Peace be with you . . ."
he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

Now that was some holy kiss, don't you think! Grounded by the risen body of our Lord, they were also touched by the Spirit—Amen! Later he invited the disciple Thomas to actually touch and be reassured of his physical reality! And thus they were grounded both physically and spiritually in Jesus' resurrected reality. Wow, imagine what it must have been like to be so persuaded and reassured in that way! Amen.

But how about the rest of us, so many centuries later; how do we get to be so grounded both physically and spiritually in our Lord's resurrection reality? How can we too live solidly based in the Easter gospel; the good news that our risen Lord is 'risen indeed?'

Well, we do it in two ways: in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist, and in fellowship with other believers--ourselves as the body of Christ in the world today. So we touch and handle the sacrament, the Eucharistic body and blood in the bread and the cup, and we pray at the altar: 'be known to us, risen Lord, in the breaking of the bread.' Thus we believe in the 'real presence' of our Lord in the sacrament; that 'in spirit and in truth' he communes with us we gather at the altar as a holy table.

But if you're like me, on most mornings when we don't have all of that resource ready to hand around us, the sacrament or the fellowship of others gathered as the body of Christ, we can still wake up 'empty and frightened,' and have to work our way to get to holy ground.

Now in describing for you that kind of work and I offer you a quite different poem; this one by the poet and feminist activist, Ellen Bass.

The Thing Is | Ellen Bass

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, How can a body withstand this?
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.

Yes, many mornings, to get to holy ground, I have to 'hold life like a face between my palms, a plain face, no charming smile, no violet eyes, and say, yes, I will take you—I will love you, again.' If you're like me, that's what waking up can be like. And I think that for us that's often what faith is like, the faith to believe in the embodied reality of our risen Lord, the faith to find holy ground where 'the beauty we love is what we do,' and the faith to embrace life again—yes, to love life again:

even when you have no stomach for it . . .
when grief weights you like your own flesh . . .
[and] you think, How can a body withstand this?

Now in more ordinary, everyday terms, our Easter preacher last Sunday, our own Bishop Rob Wright, put it this way, quoting AME Bishop Vashti McKenzie—'how can we not worship our worries' or, in his own words, 'How can we stop composing sonnets out of our sad, sad stories?'

Indeed, how can we not be worshipping at that altar—the altar of worries about finances, health issues, family problems; or obsessing about the griefs and losses we've suffered in so many ways; but instead be living into the resurrection reality of renew life beyond death, dying and destruction?

[Illustrations:] Stories from recent attendance at 12 Step meetings which emphasize recovery from addiction through dependence on a Higher Power, or the God of your own understanding—not your mis-understanding or former understanding.

But a recent atheist speaker countered with a testimony declaring no need for belief in God or in a Higher Power to stay addiction-free in recovery . . .

To which another old timer offered this 'come-back' response: But the group is your embodied Higher Power, these flesh and blood people in the 12 Step meetings who sustain you . . .

And another member who shared that he has a hard time just being in a room with this many people, but that for the sake of his recovery from addiction he shows up; despite his isolation he pushes himself to show up . . .

And so, brothers and sisters, if you're like me, waking up many mornings 'empty and frightened,' or like some of the people in these recovery stories needed to be grounded in the reality of embodied hope and support, you too can find both embodied and spiritual ways where you can touch holy ground.

Especially in this holy season, find an altar, a sacramental presence, find ways to touch and handle the sacred, find a holy person, find ways to kiss holy ground, to 'let the beauty you love be what you do,' etc.

[Exhortation:] Seek situations where we come up from the dead; come up from grief and sorrows, worries and anxieties, and find resurrection instead. "There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground."

[Concluding benediction:] Lord, in your mercy, empower us, in this Easter season, to be your risen body in this world today. Amen.