

## 4 Easter C: 21 April 2013

Last Sunday after church I learned that one of you has expressed an intention to leave St. Andrew's and find a different faith community. People come and go all the time in our community life, of course, and we note their arrival and departure in varying ways as may be appropriate. Usually this fluctuation has to do with death or changes of address, sometimes with politics or disagreements over church life, but at other times it has to do with weightier matters of faith.

This is one of those latter instances, or so I understand. I am told that this member took such offense to my sermon that they could not remain for communion but left at the Peace. They heard no good news in my attempt to proclaim what I believe is true about the resurrection and for this I am deeply sorry. I say this not out of a desire to justify or defend my words—I don't believe I need to do that—particularly not to a congregation that has stated that your next clergy partner needs to be theologically liberal and have pondered whether to call yourselves a progressive Christian community. No, I am sorry that this individual could not see here a church big enough to embrace a whole range of theological understandings and still be true to the mind of Christ.

I think that what offended our friend most deeply was my use of the "m" word: For those of you who were not here, I said that we should forget about trying to make what we read about Jesus in our scriptures conform to historical fact the way we judge "facts" today, that we should forget about the mythology (there's the offending word) that the ancients wrapped around the story of Jesus to try and communicate to others who he was to them. I said that there were more important issues for a Christian, more that was deeply true about Christ. My comments were a further development of the quote I used in my Easter sermon: that the crowning evidence of the resurrection is "...not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*. Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*." I stand by what I said; I meant it, I believe it; I will continue to preach it. If you want liberal theology, there was an example in spades. If you don't want it, or want your priest to hold it but hide expressing it, better tell the search committee to rewrite your position description quickly.

At the same time, I remain saddened that this individual's choice of response was to remove themselves from the community altogether.

It's always a surprise to me when someone hears the word "myth" as meaning the opposite of truth, because a myth by definition is "truth told in the form of a story." Myths are the product of prophetic and poetic genius. They provide us with a language to deal with the awesome mysteries of Being. For example: some Christians believe that Adam and Eve really existed, and others believe that they did not actually, historically exist. But probably all of us believe the deep Truths contained in the Genesis account of this first couple: God made us; God loves us; God gave us choice and freedom; we often make the wrong choice and misuse our freedom; when "caught," we often blame others; temptation is a real part of life and our choices can make a big difference. There are other lessons to be learned from this "myth," but the bottom line here is that the Adam and Eve story is absolutely Truth, whether it is fact or not.

Some years ago, Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson wrote a book called *Can We Trust the New Testament?*—and "trust" provides a good category for thinking about the special attitude Christians take toward the truth of the Bible as a whole and the narratives of Jesus in particular. When we trust people, we recognize their jokes as jokes, their metaphors as metaphors, and their fishing stories for the tall tales that they are. We also recognize that on the things that really matter, they won't lead us astray. So with the Bible. With all qualifications duly noted, we can still think that, as a guide to Christian faith and life, it won't lead us fundamentally astray. Turning the question "Is the Bible true?" to a question of trust is faithful to the Bible itself, for the Hebrew word we translate as "truth" carries the connotations of "trustworthiness" or "steadiness" or "faithfulness." The true person, in Hebrew, is the one you can trust—and so the true book as well.

So it is for me with the narratives of Jesus. In her book *Amazing Grace*, Kathleen Norris has written that a myth may not be true on the outside, but is true on the inside. The deepest truths I know about the nature of life and how it is to be lived authentically are those I find inside the story of Jesus. It may all be a myth, but that myth is more deeply true than any other reality I have discovered. It's the best story I know—a story worth giving my life to. When I give my life to the story— or more precisely, to that person of Jesus revealed by the story— living within that trusting relationship becomes self-authenticating.

It brings me life—authentic life.  
Borrowing from today's *pericope*,  
you could say that I hear his voice and trust what I hear,  
and that in following his voice I find my own.

Why should we trust this book, this voice in particular?  
That's a question that really has no short answer.  
In part, we trust the Bible because we find  
that it keeps making sense of the world in which we live.  
Using nearly every genre and every attitude to historical detail imaginable,  
the Bible lays out a richly diverse vision of the world,  
from beginning to end, and says, in effect,  
"This isn't some imaginary world, like Narnia beyond the wardrobe.  
This is the real world, the only one there is.  
So if you buy into this basic picture of things,  
then anything real has got to fit somewhere into this framework.  
Your life and the events around you thus will make ultimate sense  
only as they have their place within this grand story."  
And Christians find that, if they keep reading this book,  
and listening for the voice of Jesus, if they trust what they hear  
and live their lives in the context of the community that reads it and listens to him,  
that promise keeps getting fulfilled, albeit always tentatively and incompletely.

Perhaps the most important element in this mix is that  
we trust the Bible—and we trust the Jesus of the Bible—  
and we hold both to be true for us—  
because we have come to trust the God about whom they tell us.  
The process of coming to this kind of trust moves in a kind of circle:  
we trust in that God in significant part because of what we learn in the Bible,  
because of what we see revealed in the person of Jesus.  
It's a mistake to look for a single entry point into this circle.  
No one doctrine provides the foundation on which we believe all the others.  
We find ourselves trusting, in the same way we sometimes find ourselves in love,  
without being able to define the steps that led to that state,  
and the elements that shape our trust are tied together in complicated ways.

One last thought:  
If the Bible invites us into the world it narrates and describes—  
into a world with God at the center as creator and sustainer—  
it also gives us a language in which to think about both that world and ours.  
An analogy would be the experience of moving into a new culture or learning a new skill  
and finding yourself thinking in a previously foreign language.  
To understand Japan, I need to learn Japanese.  
To become a lawyer, I need to learn the vocabulary of the law.  
When I learn these new languages, I'm not just acquiring a new stock of words;  
I'm learning to think in a different way.

So it is when we learn to trust the Bible and the voice of Jesus,  
when we expand the categories of our thinking and our language  
from what is fact to what is true.

Christians today often think of our world  
in the vocabularies of contemporary politics or popular culture.  
But the Bible and Jesus offer us an alternative.

Those poor folk across town are not just "welfare recipients" or even "fellow citizens";  
they're "neighbors."

That action wasn't just "inappropriate behavior" or even "crime"; it was "sin."

When we use such a vocabulary,  
when we recognize it as God's mother tongue,  
we find ourselves thinking about the world in different ways—  
and sometimes, at least, we may find common ground with other Christians  
from whom we were divided when our only language was that of contemporary politics  
or even theological position.

To trust the Bible and the voice of Jesus, to let them be so true for us  
as to define our world and provide a language for thinking about the world,  
can transform our lives and bring us closer to being who we were created to be.  
But it does not make understanding either source very easy.

We have to get down to hard work—  
we need to study the Bible and immerse ourselves in its world and its language;  
we need to know the voice of Jesus well enough  
so that one passage reminds us of another that offers a qualification,  
another that provides support, another that sets out a different frame of reference.  
And we need to continually share with each other about what we learn,  
about what we experience, about what we find to be true and authentic,  
and about what we can only—perhaps after great struggle—reject.

When we do this, when we really know the Bible, when we really know Jesus,  
we will, I believe, recognize that we are, as Paul says, one body in Christ,  
and we will also realize the complexities, the diversities, the ambiguities  
found within each...and celebrate them all.

In the spirit of the risen Christ, Amen.