

Easter Sunday
4.24.11
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“Alleluia, Christ is Risen. He is Risen Indeed, Alleluia!” When I was a boy in the Episcopal Church of the Transfiguration, Fr. James Niles bellowed those words one Easter morning and then sat down. It was the shortest Easter sermon I have ever heard. Some day, it will be the shortest Easter sermon *you* will have ever heard. But not today. I’m just not there, yet. Here in this new chapel on this glorious day I feel I am expected to say a little more. So I want to talk about St. Paul’s logic, St. Matthew’s angel, and the number three.

In his epistle to the Corinthians, St. Paul gives his hearers a lesson in both deductive and inductive reasoning. Well schooled in both rabbinic thought and Greek philosophy, Paul certainly knew that the folks in Corinth, fairly sophisticated Greeks, would understand his use of syllogism when he says, “If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen; and if Christ be not risen, then is our preaching vain.” You see, Paul was not an eyewitness; as far as we know, he never met the historical Jesus. Indeed, it was the *resurrected* Jesus who appeared to him. His conversion, you will recall, knocked him off his high horse and empowered him to become, in essence, Christ’s publicist! Consider that over 2/3 of the New Testament is made up of Paul’s letters, and you’ll get some idea of his importance to the message. And he was a good rhetorician; he knew his audience, so it’s not surprising that he uses logic with the Corinthians: first the syllogism: if not a, then not b; if not b, then not c. Next, he uses an analogy to describe what *must be* described analogously since no one really knows what the resurrection body actually looks like. So, he argues, it’s like a seed that grows into a plant which looks nothing like it began. It is beyond corruption and it is immortal. Beyond that, it’s all guesses. This is why all religions rely on analogy and symbol.

In St. Matthew’s gospel, we find Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and a radiant angel who says what all biblical angels generally say in these situations, “Be not afraid.” (Apparently angels were fairly frightening critters, nothing like the darling cherubs adorning Hallmark cards.) Then, anticipating their concerns, he says, “I know you’re looking for Jesus, who was crucified. Why seek ye the living among the dead?” I love that line. It’s so logical, so typical of an angel, a being of pure spirit. “He is risen, as He said.” In other words, why are you surprised? Haven’t you been listening? What have you been doing these past three years while the Christ was with you? He then tells them, these *women*, mind you (about which I will have more to say a few Sundays hence): “Go tell His disciples He is risen from the dead.” On their way, Jesus appeared to them, “and they took Him by the feet, and worshipped Him.” By this act, St. Matthew expects his hearers to understand that the resurrected Christ is God, for only God is to be worshipped.

These are good readings for Easter. And we will have five more Sundays’ worth of resurrection stories commemorating the forty days Christ was walking the earth prior to His ascension. Indeed, these coming forty days of feasting balance the previous forty days of fasting. But I want to focus on the number three for awhile:

the three days in the tomb, the three parts of a human being, and to suggest three practical lessons we can draw from all of this.

First, folks are always asking me about the line in the Creed, “on the third day he rose again.” By their calculation, if He was executed on Friday, spent Saturday in the tomb, and rose sometime on Sunday, isn’t that little more than two days, really? Not if we measure days as the Jews did (and do). Remember Genesis 1:5? “And the evening and the morning were the first day.” Christ was buried on Friday afternoon before sunset, after which it was Saturday (when, interestingly, tradition has it He preached to those in Sheol), and He rose on the first day of the week, surely after sunset on Saturday, making it Easter Sunday. His burial thus spanned three days.

Okay, so what? So, the number three holds great power. Naturally (or supernaturally, I guess) for us the Holy Trinity first comes to mind: three persons in one God, and I’ll preach about *that* on Trinity Sunday. The Hindus have a trinity as well: Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. There’s also the Three Refuges of Buddhists: the Buddha, the Dharma (Teaching), and the Sangha (Community). There are Three Wise Men, Three Fates, Three Virtues, Three Stooges. . . sorry. “The Pythagoreans considered that the number three was the first true number. The Triad represents the first ‘equilibrium of unities’ and it was for this reason that the God Apollo used a tripod from which to give oracles. Three was seen as the number of wisdom, understanding, and knowledge” (Adele Nozedar, *The Element Encyclopedia of Secret Signs and Symbols*). And, of course, since we are made in the image and likeness of God, Who is Triune, it is not surprising that we also are tripartite, made up of body, soul, and spirit.

My first exposure to the Liberal Catholic Church in the early 80s came from Abbott George Burke and a journal he edited for many years. Over the years his spiritual path has morphed into a more eastern flavor, and now he goes by the name Swami Nirmalananda Giri, but he has never abandoned his Christian roots, and his take on the symbolism of the Resurrection is fascinating. He writes:

Man is a body, a mind, and an individualized spirit—he is physical, psychic, and spiritual. We must resurrect from the confinement of our consciousness within all three and ascend to God. In each of the three we experience ‘evening,’ a period of preparatory darkness, and the dawn of that day’s ‘morning’ light.
(blog.atmajyoti.org/2009/04/the-symbolism-of-the-resurrection)

The points he goes on to make are really more esoteric than is necessary to explore in detail here, but the general idea is worth leaving with you. The Resurrection of Christ after three days in the tomb is not an activity relegated to Christ alone but is emblematic of His followers as well; as Christians we are ‘little Christs’ and it should not be surprising that what he did we must do. Christ is our ideal. Think of that: Christ is God—fully human and fully divine (or as I would rather picture it, fully divine because he is fully human). And He is our example, the archetype Whom we ascribe to become. This is the meaning of St. Clement of Alexandria when he says, “The Logos of God became man so that you may learn from man how man may become God.” It isn’t blasphemy; it is theosis.

First, we are bodies. But if we identify with our bodies “totally, calling the body ‘me,’ and believing that to be ‘alive’ means to be in a ‘living’ physical body” (Atma Jyoti), then we set ourselves up for trouble. The ‘preparatory darkness’ of this stage, identification with the body, means we succumb to the various perversions so prevalent in our society: a fastidiousness with fitness at one extreme and a hedonism of victuals and inebriants at the other. We either exercise ourselves into grotesqueries or we overindulge or medicate ourselves into dullards desperate to alleviate the pain of existence. Identification with the body requires “discipline and control [of] the bodily senses [so] that they cannot nail us any longer onto the cross of material sufferings or pleasures” (Atma Jyoti). Of course, as a corrective, the Church gives us Lent, a period of fasting; and most spiritual traditions have a corrective in mind: the month of Ramadan for Muslims, the Fifth Precept against intoxicants for Buddhists, and so on. But beyond Lent, the ‘morning light’ of this day comes into us through meditation.

For, in addition to our bodies, we are souls, psyches, minds. And when we delve deeply therein through meditation, what will we discover?

That it is dark with ignorance. It cannot see Reality; rather, what it thinks it ‘sees’ is an hallucination of the ego. It does not really know anything. This is a very difficult insight for most people to cope with, and if their egotism is strong, they simply do not acknowledge it, and pull back, refusing to go any further. This is why some people begin the Way of Christ but after a few weeks, months, or years begin to get shaky and eventually vanish without a trace, having returned to the kingdom of darkness. But those who press onward, more desirous of winning immortality than of feeling good about themselves, face the facts about their condition and begin to work with the mind to purify it, just as they did with the body” (Atma Jyoti).

During book group this Lent, some of us began a series of spiritual practices, among the chief of which is meditation, and it is something I recommend for everyone. It is the corrective for our over-identification with our minds, our fantasies, our dreams. Just as we are not simply bodies, neither are we just our minds. Through meditation, we discover these truths.

Negative thoughts and feelings will arise during meditation as a matter of course, but if we keep on meditating they will be dissolved. God allows us to see them as they arise so we will not foolishly think that we are already purified and free from darkness. Also, it helps keep us humble and in a correct perspective, realizing that we need to keep on working, for we have a long way to go before reaching perfection. In real spiritual life meditation is often a war with hand-to-hand combat unto death. The secret is to keep on meditating. When faced with the awesome depths of the mind, the foolish turn back, but the wise press on, for meditation is a powerful mode of ‘psychic surgery’ which deeply purifies and reshapes the mind. Every time the aspirant meditates he is subtly changed. If his life has been so ordered to conform to the principles of Christ, the change will be permanent, and the more he meditates, the greater will be the effect—strengthening and freeing him. (Atma Jyoti)

We purify our bodies on the first day (not 24 hours, of course, but years, perhaps even aeons); we purify our minds on the second day, and when we have succeed at these, on the third day, our spirits are finally free: we are resurrected. For we are not only bodies or souls but, perhaps primarily, we are spirits.

Until the time of resurrection, our spirit is darkened, forgetting where it has come from and identifying completely with the ever-changing and suffering body and mind. A great deal of work is required to even become aware of our present status. Once we rise above the psychic, we can enter into the domain of the spirit to behold our spirit helplessly bound in its 'grave clothes,' like the Lord Himself in the tomb. The Lord in His resurrection passed through the grave clothes (John 20:4-7)—and so must we. Just as Christ left them behind in the tomb, when we resurrect into spirit we leave behind all bonds of body, mind, and spirit. Those who are wise get busy right now and work intensely to free themselves from any further entanglements. (Atma Jyoti)

St. Paul preaches logic and uses an analogy to help his hearers grasp the mystery of Christ's resurrection from the dead. St. Matthew records what the women at the empty tomb saw and heard, giving an air of historicity to the event. But we weren't there, and we're a good deal more sophisticated than earlier folks, aren't we? Some would say we are more sophisticated than is good for us. I don't doubt Paul's vision, and I don't deny Matthew's gospel; but I know these works offer neither biography nor history nor geography nor science. They are pedagogy. They are, as St. John says in his gospel, "recorded in order that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may have life by his name." That is the first lesson. The second is that these sacred words always have a deeper, more symbolic meaning applicable to each one of us in our journey toward perfection in Christ, hints of which I have touched upon in relating our tripartite being as it relates to Christ's resurrection. And the third lesson—certainly more obvious than the previous two-- is that *none of this matters one whit until it resonates with you personally*. My authority to provide the sacraments is fairly specific, limited to waiting tables, really. In a moment, you will pray "to the end that Thy holy people may be knit more closely into fellowship with Thee, we pray for Thy servant who ministers at this altar, that, meetly celebrating the mysteries of the most holy Body and Blood of Thy Son, he may be filled with Thy mighty power and blessing." That's it.

Today is special because it commemorates Christ's resurrection, but really every Sunday is a little Easter, every Sunday is another chance to support one another in our quest for truth, every Sunday is another opportunity to offer our bodies, souls, and spirits to God, from Whom we received them in the first place. I hope to see you every Sunday.