

Lighthouses and Ferry Boats

Many years ago our family took the ferry across the English Channel. The weather was mild, but it was very foggy. We didn't worry, because we knew the ferry had radar and navigation equipment to keep us clear of other shipping and locate Dover, our destination. So we were surprised when in mid-voyage the engines fell silent and the fog totally closed us in.

I was out on the deck enjoying the mist, over by the rail. From the gloom I heard a voice hailing the ferry and, peering out, saw a tiny sailboat bobbing in the swells. "WHICH WAY'S ENGLAND?" came the cry across the waves. And from the ferry's loud-hailer came the reply, "FOLLOW ME."

That, I think, is a helpful way to think of the Church, as the way-pointer. Last Sunday's Gospel began with the Greek citizens who approached Jesus' disciple Philip with the request, "Sir, we would see Jesus" (the story is in John 12). On retreat a month ago, our Vestry used that story as the theme for the weekend. We asked ourselves, how does our parish make Jesus visible? And, how might we make him yet more visible?

In the story in John, Jesus begins immediately to disclose his peculiar and paradoxical nature, as he compares himself to the grain of wheat that must die and be buried before it can bring forth a new harvest. He insists that in this way God's name is glorified.

Not much obvious glory in what we know lies ahead, death by crucifixion. But he insists, "When I am lifted up, I will draw everyone to me." "Follow me."

A lonely business, being Jesus. And often enough a lonely business being church. The disciples weren't at all keen on being arrested with Jesus. And often enough, when the fog lifts and the storm subsides sailors scarcely notice the ferry boats or the lighthouses.

But come the fog and the storm, as inevitably they do come, direction-indicators and hazard-markers are not only welcome but life-saving.

When we get it right, the Church points to Jesus and demonstrates that "the way of the Cross is none other than the way of life," as the Prayer Book collect for Fridays puts it. And Jesus of course is the one who makes God visible in the most startling way, by letting go of that which is precious—life lived in foggy awareness—for that which is absolutely precious, life lived in the clarity of understanding and commitment that John calls eternal life and the other Gospels call the realm of God.

One of the great bishops of the Anglican Communion—was it Stephen Neil?—said, "The Church is the only organization that exists to serve those who are not yet members of it." We are the ferry boat crew and the lighthouse keepers. And God helping us we chart the way, making Jesus visible.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

Farewells

As I left his hospital room a few days ago, I said goodbye. We had shared communion with his son. I had said the prayers for the end of life. I lingered in the doorway, my hand upraised in a gesture that felt like a wave and a salute and the outstretched palm of blessing. Our eyes met.

I had said, "I know I will see you again." Those are the words of belief, of faith, of hope. As our eyes met, the length of the room measured not a few feet but the intensity of longing and the vast gulf between believing and knowing.

My role was to walk away to the next task among the living. His role was to stay there, and to die, an old man surrounded by his loving family.

All of our leave-takings are tinged with the unspoken possibility that they will be final. That we will never see that person again. Not in this world and this lifetime. Nor in the next one, because there may not be a next one. We don't know for sure.

John's Gospel, so unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke, reveals Jesus' own farewells, spoken in the shadow of death—five full chapters (13-17) spoken in the defining intensity of his impending appointment with the Cross.

Like a loving parent, Jesus is content that he has "taught them all that I learned from thee" (17:8), and that they know that "this is eternal life: to know thee who alone art truly God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (17:3). He prays that they, and those who follow them, may have the unity with one another and with God that he has manifested (20-23).

But even in John, whose Jesus continually reveals his God-like knowledge, Jesus' last words are ambiguous: "It is accomplished" (19:30). There is satisfaction in those words. They do not register the terrible dread of Mark's "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me" (15:33), which quotes Psalm 22:1. Yet at the moment of death knowledge—assurance, certainty, clarity—is absent.

Luke provides the key ingredient of farewells. When knowledge fails, faith and hope find their most powerful voice. But the countervailing experiences of life—every brutal reality that makes belief in a loving God a cruel joke—surely are present as well. Amidst those colliding realities Luke reports Jesus' last words as a quotation of Psalm 31:5, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." That commitment is ultimate, final, absolute, complete. In it, farewell takes on the glory of God. In that commitment, in that farewell, we are united with each other and our Lord and our God, in a glory that we can only guess at until that farewell, and that commitment, is our part to play.

But we can sense it in the energy of that last meeting of the eyes, across the hospital room.

—Rev. Ben Brockman

Resurrection Appearances

The four Gospels recognized by the Church and included in the Bible all present a Jesus who appears to his friends and disciples after they discover his empty tomb. They recognize him, but not immediately. He continues his teaching, challenging and encouraging them. He can do stranger things than even before—like appear in a room where doors and windows have been closed and locked. He even eats food with them.

He's the same Jesus as before—but significantly different.

How different is something artists have tried to capture down through the centuries. One of my favorite depictions is that of the Piero della Francesca, an artist of the Italian Renaissance. He portrays the moment of the Resurrection, with Jesus standing victorious over his tomb, a knight's banner—red cross on white background—flying from a staff in his hand. The sleeping soldiers sent to guard the tomb are just stirring from their slumber. Jesus towers over them all, as we view the scene from ground level.

An intriguing detail, also traditional by Piero's time, is that on the viewer's left—Jesus' right—the landscape remains the drab landscape of winter, while on the opposite side spring is clothing the trees with new foliage and flowers bloom. You can see the same tradition realized in the diorama of the Easter Garden that Courtney Austin created again for us this year. It is located in the foyer of the Old Post Road entrance to the education wing of the church. Three crosses stand starkly on one side, amidst cacti, dry sand and bare twigs. On the other side, surrounding the empty tomb, are spring flowers and the vegetation brought forth by spring rain.

But what most fascinates me about Piero's depiction of the Resurrection is the look on Jesus' face. It's a wide-eyed stare, a look at once of joy and surprise—and of memory that is stark and haunting. It reminds me of twentieth-century photographs of soldiers emerging from prolonged combat. Jesus' wounds are still bloody.

You can see this image by Googling "Piero della Francesca Resurrection." You can also participate in what I guarantee will be a superb discussion of the Art of Easter at this Sunday's Forum, in the Parish Hall, 10:30 – 11:15, presented by Dr. Marice Rose, who teaches at Fairfield University and lectures at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

And you can ponder where it is and how it is that you and I still encounter the Risen Lord. Is it when we break bread together, as happened to his disciples at Emmaus? Is it when we gather for communion, fear dogging us for one reason or another, and suddenly his voice says "Be not afraid"? Is it when we simply notice that the sun is shining?

And perhaps you can reflect on the resurrections of your own life. When you have emerged from the tomb, the stone rolled away. Joyful. Surprised. Grateful. And still remembering what dying was like. Your own resurrection appearance, with your own strange power and stark memories.

—Rev. Ben Brockman