

Sermon Easter 2 Year A 2023

In the New Testament accounts of our Lord's resurrection, one of the earliest and most consistent ways of identifying the mystery of the resurrection was to speak of *the third day*. It is the *third day* that the New Testament writers identify as the day on which something definitive happened. On *the third day* something without precedence occurred. It is the events of the *third day* which secures the disciples' continuing loyalty and propels them forward in faith. The effects of what happened that *third day* were nothing less than revolutionary. In the words of Peter in the second reading today: *a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead*.

For the New Testament writers, the *third day* is presented as a work of *completion*. But it is a work that completes something only to *begin* something. It was the *third day* in which God is seen to inaugurate something totally new, the new era of God's reign; the era of God's New Creation. While Genesis speaks of the *seven days* of creation, the Fathers of the Church saw the New Creation begun in Christ's Resurrection as *the eighth day*. It is no coincidence that it is on *the eighth day* we find ourselves in the Gospel today. In fact, the gospel takes to both the night of *the third day*, the first day of the week, that is the day of resurrection, and then to *eight days later*, when the disciples are joined by Thomas. It is in fact the eighth day that our entire Christian pilgrimage unfolds as well. *We* are the people of the New Creation.

It is because we are people of the eighth day, people of the New Creation, that in so many places, (not here, unfortunately) that church fonts so often have eight sides. That's not an accident! We have been building eight-sided fonts from at least the fifth century! (Our own font here - combining in its design both the square and the circle - is equally ancient, and speaks of the joining of heaven [represented by the circle] and the earth [represented by the square]). Whatever shape our fonts take, being people of the New Creation is why the theme and language of baptism features so prominently during this Easter season. This is why you will all get wet with baptismal water at the start of mass throughout Eastertide - to remind us that as baptismal people we are in the age of God's New Creation; we *are* God's new creation.

Now, this is an essential aspect of our Christian faith. Because asserting this status as God's new creatures helps remedy two significant errors that can creep in when considering the mystery of the resurrection. The first subtle error we can make is – yes – to regard the resurrection as something remarkable, something one-off, something really special that God does for Jesus, but that we sort of leave it there. We can - in some folkloric versions of Christianity - leave the resurrection as a remarkable, special moment *of the past*. We can approach the resurrection as an historical moment (even a special, impressive moment) but stop there. While the New Testament record will agree that the resurrection is impressive and special, that it is indeed God's great work in Jesus, *they do not* leave it there! In fact, it is placed at the very centre of all history!

The second error, that can creep into our thinking on the resurrection is to think that its significance is just something that will happen to us in the future. The benefits of Christ's triumph over death will be realised in us on the last day, at the general resurrection of the dead. At that point, our bodies too will be glorified, and we will be united with God for eternity. Yes, through the power of the resurrection, we confess that death has lost its sting. It is no longer permanent. And one day, Jesus will trample death altogether. That's the crux of Paul's argument in 1 Cor 15: If Jesus is raised, we will be raised too. But this position too can have us neglect what is happening here and now.

These two errors - of thinking that the resurrection is just something really special that happened in the past, and that its benefits will only be realised in the future – leaves us with an impossible gap, the gap between those two moments, (the gap we find ourselves!) but into which the resurrection has no real impact. But our participation in the resurrection isn't merely in the future, much less something stuck in the past! Jesus says repeatedly in John's Gospel that whoever believes in him *has* eternal life. In Romans 6, Paul says that through baptism, we're united with Jesus in his death and burial, so that *as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*. Resurrection life is life for now! United to Christ through baptism, we die to sin and are freed from it. Death no longer dominates Jesus, and so it can't dominate us either. Therefore, *consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus*. In other words, there is a *practical consequence* to the resurrection. Our lives are to show that *something new* has taken hold.

This *something new* is precisely what is highlighted for us in the gospel placed before us today, as it is every year on this second Sunday of Easter. It reminds us how the disciples gathered in fear share in the fruits of Christ's resurrection. And it reminds us how the mystery, the revelation, *and the benefits* of the *first day* are carried through to the *eighth day*. This is John's way of saying that resurrection life is carried through to us, *to those who believe but do not see*.

This is what is indicated by our Lord breathing on the disciples and saying *Receive the Holy Spirit*. Remember, this is the first day of the week. The expression *he breathed on them* is the very same used for God breathing life into the first man in the Genesis story of creation. The implication is that what is occurring in the closed room is nothing less than a new creation! Jesus as the New Adam shares his new life with his disciples. He breathes on them, and he gives them his very spirit. Again, this gift has practical consequences. And the impact is nothing less than a sharing in Christ's own mission: *As the Father sent me, so I send you*.

But Thomas representing all of us creatures of the eighth day likewise receives Christ's greeting of peace. And importantly he also receives the gift of the spirit. This is the whole point of *give me your hand put it in my side*. This is not so much to provide a proof to a doubter, but to *include* Thomas in the life Christ imparts. It is from the side of Christ which flowed blood and water. Water in the fourth gospel is always a sign of the Spirit. The spirit flows from the side of Christ, the same spirit which gives life, the source of which Thomas has direct access to. And so do we. Thomas here serves as a symbolic 'conduit'. New Life and the Spirit is drawn from the side of Christ to us, God's New Creation, the children of the eighth day.

The fullness of Christian faith means we are not content to leave the resurrection either in the past or even as some ultimate hope for the future. The power of the resurrection is the power to impact and change lives here and now. We are creatures of the eighth day. Faith in Christ means we receive the spirit of new life. The challenge of Christian life is to live as if we truly are new creations. Amen.