

The Second Sunday in Easter

April 27, 2025

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So, here's a curious thing about the gospels that Frederick Buechner once observed. The announcements of Jesus's birth are pretty grand. A heavenly host of angels singing, "Glory to God in the highest." Wise men from the East summoned to Bethlehem by the very stars of the sky. The first chapter of John is grander yet, with swirling language that evokes the creation of the whole cosmos. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us..." That kind of stuff.

But the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus are strangely subdued. Strangely ordinary, if you will. Mary mistakes the risen Christ for a gardener. He sidles up to two men walking the seven dusty miles to Emmaus. Cooks fish over a charcoal fire on the beach where his friends are fishing. The details are so mundane. Why is that? What does it do to the stories? What's it supposed to do to us?

Today we read the story that got Thomas marked as a doubter for centuries. But the weird ordinariness is here too. John tell us the doors of the room were locked, but the risen Christ appears anyhow. And when he does, he presents his friends with the wounds on his hands and his side, like two forms of identification for the clerk at the DMV. Then he breathes on them. Tells them they can release people from their sins.

But Thomas wasn't there. Thomas says he won't believe until he's presented with the same two forms of ID. And a week later, he gets them. "Put your finger here and see my hands," Jesus says. "Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Yes, this resurrected body is something different, since it just passed through a locked door. But ordinary, bodily, human encounter is at the heart of all the gospel stories after the resurrection.

One way some Christians have read this story is that Thomas has to pass a test. He's got to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Otherwise the benefits of the resurrection aren't available to him. The same goes for us. But this makes Jesus sound like the White Queen when she brags to Alice that some days she manages to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast. The notion that holding a particular, if seemingly impossible, idea about the resurrection in your head is what matters most to God seems completely counter to the way these stories keep returning us to ordinary bodily existence with one another. Even post resurrection... maybe especially post resurrection, Jesus's project is still to return us to the sacred ordinary.

This is what he taught as well, wasn't it? He insisted that he had no interest in setting aside the Torah, the Law. And Jesus died a faithful and observant Jew. What he did say is that humans can

forget that people are more important than principles to God. And people should be more important than principles to us. The Law was created for humankind, is how he put it. Not humankind for the Law.

So thinking of Christian faith in terms of holding an orthodox concept of the resurrection in your head, and believing God is waiting for you to do just that before God will forgive your sins and offer you eternal life, at least strikes this Christian as the opposite of the Good News these gospels tell. It's your embodied life that God loves. It's your neighbor's and even your enemy's embodied life that Jesus wants to come abundantly alive.

If you know anything about Dietrich Bonhoeffer's story, you probably know that he was imprisoned for his part in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler, and that he was executed at the Flossenburg concentration camp in 1945 only weeks before American forces arrived to liberate it. If you know anything about Bonhoeffer's theology, it's probably the term "cheap grace." Given his biography, you might assume he was saying you can't be Christian unless you have the kind of selfless courage he had. But here are his actual words.

Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian "conception" of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. The Church which holds the correct doctrine of grace has, it is supposed, *ipso facto* a part in that grace.

Bonhoeffer, like the gospels I think, said in the strongest terms that the gospel isn't about holding some idea about the resurrection or about the grace of God in your head. Its truth, its meaning, its power are meant to show up in your embodied life with other people.

The other day I heard a story that crystalized this for me. Interestingly enough, it was a journalist who is training to be a rabbi — that is, someone who doesn't believe Jesus rose from the dead — who showed me how I think God wants the resurrected Christ to change me.

The journalist turned rabbi's name is Richard Allen Greene, and he was the Jerusalem Bureau Chief for CNN when the October 7th attacks took place. His interviewer was a Christian writer named Elizabeth Oldfield. They were talking about how difficult it is to hold two truths at once these days. We're constantly expected to take sides. Right now, Oldfield said, it seems especially difficult, at least in public, to condemn unequivocally both the horror of Hamas's actions on October 7 and the Israeli government's brutal response. She wanted the journalist/rabbi-in-training's wisdom.

Richard Greene offered her the ancient word *shekinah*. It's a feminine word derived from a Hebrew root that means "to dwell within." So it's the word Jews use when they're talking about the presence of God within each human being. He'd recently heard one of the freed Israeli hostages expressing sympathy for the brutalized people of Gaza. People asked her, "How can you feel sorry for them after what you've been through?" And she said, "I won't let Hamas take me away from me.

I want good for good people. And most people are good.” Richard Greene said, “This is what it looks like for someone to have shekinah... holiness dwelling within her.”

He said we’ve got to learn to see shekinah in all sorts of different people. Like his Palestinian aid worker friend who could have left Gaza but stayed. When he calls every few weeks to ask how he can help her, she says things like, “Can you find me an online creative writing course?” He talked about a friend he disagrees with on just about everything, a right wing West Bank settler rabbi. They were walking together after the leader of Hamas was killed, and when a child rushed up to offer them celebratory candy, the friend refused and soberly told the child, “We never celebrate the death of another human being.” And he talked about his Israeli soldier friend who, upon retirement, walked right into the streets of Jerusalem to protest the war. “All the individual people are more complicated than you think they are,” said Richard Allen Greene. And we are too, aren’t we? All of us. At least we are when we see each other as actual bodies in the world rather than walking collections of doctrines and ideas.

What I think ties together Bonhoeffer’s fierce warning against grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system, and the way Jesus and the gospel accounts keep pulling us back from disembodied belief in principles and into life in the flesh with other people, is the shekinah of God doesn’t dwell in abstract ideas. She dwells in every incarnate human life. And our religious systems and practices and rituals are only of God insofar as they reorient us toward the shekinah in one another.

To baptize a baby like Eleanor, which we did at the 8am service, is a sacramental witness to the truth that shekinah does not arrive in a human once they can say the creeds without crossing their fingers or once they’ve ascribed to any other Christian idea. We baptize her body because God’s glory is already present to us in her. And she is reminding us that we learn who we are, not in the abstract, but in daily life with one another, even as the complicated, imperfect people we are. This is what it means to be part of the body of Christ, which now includes her.

All the individual people are more complicated than you think they are. Thomas was. Eleanor is already. So is your neighbor in the pew. And so is the apparent arch enemy of everything you believe to be good and beautiful and true. Because every human person has the complicating glory of shekinah pulsing somewhere within them.

So go be a Thomas. Not Thomas, the cool skeptic of tradition. But Thomas who knows that incarnate relationship with complicated people is what we’re made for, not membership in a religious club we join by storing beliefs in the attic of our mind, like furniture under bedsheets no one even thinks to sit on anymore. Go be a Thomas. The one who knows that the shekinah of God dwells not in the heavens, but is housed in broken, beautiful, ordinary lives like yours. Go be a Thomas, who at least had the sense not to be satisfied with belief in an abstraction when what he needed was holy contact with the scarred and wounded body of a friend.