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Receiving the Holy Spirit: Easter 5 (John 20: 19-23)

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The gospel stories suggest a certain unfolding in the disciples' experience of the resurrection. First, Jesus' tomb is discovered to be empty. Then, he appears to them as risen from the dead. Finally, they receive the Holy Spirit. What I notice about this progression of events is that the apostles' experience of Jesus' resurrection seems to become more and more self-implicating. It's not just something going on 'out there', but it's also something that increasingly affects 'in here'.¹ In this Easter season, we've been exploring how the resurrection is the foundation of our faith – how it gives *content* to our faith, and how it *generates* faithful lives.

Two weeks ago, we focused on the empty tomb and Jesus' return to his disciples. This experience, we saw, began their process of transformation. Jesus had been their teacher, one they trusted to show them the truth about God and about how to live. But he'd been killed at the prompting of the religious authorities, and his humiliating death seemed definitive proof that he'd been on the wrong track, rejected by God as much as by the crowds. Yet in the resurrection, incredibly, terrifyingly, he appears to them alive. They imagine he'd be entitled to vanquish his foes and failed supporters, but in his risen presence there is no vengeance or reproach. Jesus returns offering peace, forgiveness, restoring his followers to themselves and to relationship with him. What he reveals then is that neither God's presence in nor God's love for the world is cancelled by the world's violence and hostility. Through Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the disciples realise in a profoundly new and life-changing way that God is *for us*. The deep and abiding context of everything is accepting and un-killable love.

¹ See James Alison, *Knowing Jesus* (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1994), p.7.

Believing *that* good news transforms their basic stance in life. They no longer have to be afraid, to live as if they're threatened by death or shame or what others may do to them. And this means they can be generous and hospitable – even to the outcast, even to their enemies; they can be bold and risk themselves for the sake of sharing this good news because they no longer need to secure their lives or meaning for themselves. As Jesus had said to them: 'Because I live, you also will live'.

But the transformation wrought by resurrection doesn't end here. Last week, we focused on a second dimension of the disciples' experience – their sense of being called still to follow where he leads. The risen Jesus tells them he's going ahead of them to Galilee; he says he's ascending to his Father and our Father. He keeps creating spaces into which the disciples are called to step, without any clear sense of where they're going or what it will mean.

And this experience of being called to live into an open horizon transforms them at a deeper level. They are being weaned off self-reliance and the need for control. They're growing in the capacity to persevere in the midst of what looks like failure, vulnerability and impossibility. Through this process of radical self-entrustment, they become available in a whole new way for the Word, for the purpose of God to come alive in and through them. More and more they are sourced in listening, in obedience – receiving their lives as gift and call, and so fitted to play their part in God's ongoing ministry of creation and reconciliation.

So first, they're invited to *believe* the resurrection, which transforms their sense of God and the possibilities of human relationship and community. Then, they're called to *follow* the risen Christ, which deepens their practice of listening and self-dispossession, of radical availability for God's purpose. But the transformation wrought by resurrection doesn't end here, either. For then, they *receive* the gift of the Holy Spirit.

When and exactly how this happens is narrated in different ways. In John's gospel, as we heard tonight, it's when Jesus first comes to the upper room. Here it's as if

the three dimensions of the experience of resurrection unfold together. Jesus shows them it's really him, and delivers them from fear, saying 'Peace be with you'. He commissions them to follow in his way: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you'. And then, 'he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit"'. In Luke's account, there's more of a chronological gap between the first appearance of the risen Lord and the descent of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost. But the essential dynamic of the story is the same – Jesus first appears to the disciples, then commissions them for ministry and finally assures them, 'I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24: 49).

So, how does the gift of the Holy Spirit relate to and deepen the transformation effected by the other dimensions of the experience of resurrection? Three things seem insisted on in the gospels. First – at a certain point, which Luke puts at the symbolic forty days, Jesus' physical resurrection appearances cease. He 'ascends' to the Father, and thereafter is present to the disciples and all who come later only through the Spirit. Second – this Spirit is the same Spirit as was in Jesus. This means, to put it a little crudely, that the 'content' of the Spirit's life is made visible at the human level by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. 'The Holy Spirit', James Alison says, 'is not some vague, numinous force ... The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Jesus'. So third, this means that as we receive and deepen our receptivity to the Spirit dwelling within us, our lives partake more and more of the shape of Christ's life. What the Spirit does is to reproduce in those who receive it Jesus' life, Jesus' way of being. The energy of God's self-giving life is transforming us from the inside out; we discover in ourselves a deepening faithfulness, hope and compassion. We begin, like Christ, to incarnate the life of God in a hostile and frightened world, for the Spirit, says Rowan Williams, 'is that which more and more conforms [us] to Christ'.

I began by saying that the disciples' experience of resurrection gradually becomes more and more self-implicating, not just going on 'out there' but profoundly affecting 'in

here'. It's not that by receiving the Holy Spirit we become identical to Jesus. Jesus remains *other* to us – calling and converting us, for we are not yet fully conformed to him. At the same time, the testimony of the saints of our tradition is that less and less are we able to know ourselves as separate from the life of God in us. St Paul said, it is 'no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'. And the 15th century St Catherine of Genoa, cried 'My me is God, nor do I know myself except in him'. It's as if we are becoming one with God. Rowan Williams has said: 'The end of the believer's life is knowledge of God in conformity to God. Knowledge of God is not a subject's conceptual grasp of an object, it is sharing what God is, more boldly you might say, sharing God's "experience"' (p.23). It means increasingly seeing as God sees, loving as God loves, forgiving as God forgives.

The resurrection is the foundation of our faith, because it's the event that reveals and gives us access to this whole new possibility for being in the world – a way of being whose ultimate end is to participate in God's own life and so in the liberation of all things. There's a beautiful Eucharistic prayer in the Anglican prayer book, which expresses something of what I've hoped to say over these past few weeks about our life in the wake of resurrection. Let us pray:

Generous God,
we give you thanks and praise
that when we were still far off
you met us in your Son and brought us home.
Dying and living, he declared your love,
gave us grace, and opened the gate of glory.
May we who share Christ's body live his risen life;
we who drink his cup bring life to others;
we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world.
**Keep us in this hope that we have grasped;
so we and all your children shall be free,
and the whole earth live to praise your name. Amen**