

Raised Together
(Mark 16:1-8)

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Last Saturday, we had that big rain night, followed by an overnight freeze. And for better or worse we decided to call off church; better safe than sorry; if somebody didn't slip on the ice that would have, then calling it off was worth it.

But when Sunday morning came, I sat in my bathrobe looking out the window, and I couldn't help feeling disappointed. Everything was ready to go and Palm Sunday would have given us a good start to Holy Week and our first Sunday back in the sanctuary. I was looking forward to our shared work of worshipping God and to being lifted up by the little moments of good will that we extend to each other on Sunday mornings.

It is funny how the smallest kindness can make you forget whatever was getting you down and how Jesus always seems to slip in the back door to warm your heart, always before you know it.

I remembered how my Mother used to say that, if she missed church, something didn't feel right the following week, something needed to be corrected by returning to worship the next Sunday. She said she couldn't quite put her finger on why she felt that way. I think it had to do with the way Jesus sneaks into us, when we are together; its like a quiet puff of Spiritual oxygen that I think she got by going to church on Sunday. And that puff of Spiritual oxygen gave her the little bit extra that she needed to carry her through the week feeling more contented.

Every week each of us goes about shopping, visiting, helping out here and there or whatever is on the to-do list, before ending up in church. And I have always liked the idea that we are a bit like blood cells who are sent out to zoom about the body, carrying a supply of spiritual oxygen with us, wherever we go. And after zooming about the body for a while week, as we respond to various needs, our supply of spiritual oxygen starts to dwindle. But then, on Sunday, the church, acting as the heart of the body, pulls us in and reoxygenates us, before sending us out again.

And sometimes all we get is a quiet puff of spiritual oxygen that we hardly notice afterwards. Something about being together and remembering who we are as God's children and spending a few hours snapped into place, as pieces of that larger puzzle that is Christ's body, is all it takes. It provides a rhythm to our lives that adds an important "something more" that is missing, when it doesn't happen.

So, as I am getting older, I am getting a better understanding of my mother's words. Somehow, just the act of going to church, of touching base with you all lifts me up in a way that I often take for granted or don't even think about. But I notice it when it's not there. Everything feels a bit off track and needs a correction. That's how I felt this week after missing Palm Sunday. Maybe you felt a bit like that too.

Jesus Comes in A Big Way

I like the idea that church is a place where you get Spiritual oxygen. Because when oxygen fills your lungs, your whole body tingles your mind and all your limbs come to life. It's a taste of the resurrection. And the Gospel for this morning represents a

kind of super charged moment of that life giving power. Because on Easter morning, Jesus slips in and he comes to them in a big and shocking way.

His followers have been in a cocoon of mourning since the moment of his crucifixion. Their world and all the possibilities they saw in Jesus had been shrunk to disappearing and they had given in to the normal course of grieving. They had been grieving, just as we grieve, when our own vision of a greater life is fading and life begins to seem more and more like a tiny cocoon, with nothing further to offer, but the victory of death. We go into a kind of death induced sleep.

I think that the experience of taking part in Jesus's resurrection for us must be sort of like the moment when the cocoon begins to crack open and the caterpillar realizes that life as a butterfly is about to begin. At first it can't stop trembling and, its wings are wet and unusable. But in a while they take shape and dry and the butterfly begins to exercise its wings and then takes to the air.

The magnitude of the gift that the caterpillar turned butterfly has received takes some time to realize, because it is too good to be true, and yet it is true. Who knew that the possibility of life with wings existed? At the same time, the gift was terrifying, because it is terrifying to leave the safety of the cocoon, when we have conditioned ourselves to believe that nothing else exists. No wonder the people who came to the tomb, fled in terror at what they encountered.

It a powerful and deeply personal experience to discover that God has given us wings. But what missing Palm Sunday this year reminded me of is something that is hinted at in this morning's version of the resurrection story, but is very important

to our fuller understanding of the gift that we are given when we are raised with Christ. And that is, that we are not raised solely as individuals apart from others. We are raised together as a people. That is why the mysterious man dressed in white tells the mourners who are gathered at the tomb to go back and tell the others, and he tells them that they will find Jesus waiting for them there.

This doesn't mean that we don't need Spiritual time to be alone. But it does mean that something essential to Christian faith and to our participation in Christ's resurrection is missing, unless it happens as part of a deepening commitment to sharing our lives with others who have been touched by the same Spirit.

I felt somehow unraised, flat, one dimensional, last Sunday, and I know that it is because I wasn't in church, where other people would be there to impact me in whatever way God wanted it to happen. It was a pleasant and quiet day. But something essential to my spiritual wholeness was missing and it was the spiritual oxygen that I get from sharing in worshipping and witnessing to the love of God, even as the imperfect people that we are.

I believe that too many people today are living in a cocoons of their own making, in part because our society (incorrectly in my view) has put too much emphasis on salvation either as something you can do for yourself or as something that happens between each one of us and God alone. Unfortunately, when we lean too much into that point of view, the existence of other people and of loving community starts to seem irrelevant. Even messy and unloving community, which the church can sometimes be, seems unnecessary.

But that is contrary to the understanding of salvation in the Bible. Loving God and loving our neighbors are two parts of a Commandment that cannot be separated. One is not possible without the other. That is the Biblical view.

God does not intend us to be saved in isolation, half asleep in the deceptive warmth of our cocoons. God created us to fly, and for the experience of flying to happen through the bumping together of different people who are committed to each other's well-being. Because through the impact of these relationships we become more than just ourselves. The others become a part of who we are in a way that deepens our love and gratitude. Our love becomes more than just a concept, it becomes a heaven populated with the faces and personalities of our brothers and sisters in Christ.

God wants to build us up together into his resurrected body; the body of Christ, where our deepest joy and our salvation is finding out how we fit as one of the parts of that Body and where we can joyfully serve by giving in the best way we can. And in God's grace and wisdom there is a special role for everyone. If you are here, then you are part of God's plan to save the rest of us.

So, this year I'd like to emphasize that resurrection is more than just a personal experience of blessing. It is also a kind of "synergy"; a shared experience born of our commitment to follow Christ. It is an experience in which we realize just how

much we are really a part of each other, and of our loved ones, past, present and future. And we discover how great a gift it is to be a part of that shared Spirit.

It is a spiritual reoxygenation that comes from being part of this shared body. (The world is starving for this spiritual oxygen.) Let us rejoice in what God has done for us and give thanks for the blessing of being raised in community. Hallelujah! Christ is Risen!