

The Power of Presence

Yesterday I had my two hawks in Salado for their first annual Earth Day Celebration. If you don't know by now, among many things, I am a falconer. And part of being a falconer is being ready and willing to make your hobby public. We do it for a very important reason. We want to conserve the resource, which depends on education of the public about birds of prey, and their role in the health of our environment. But besides the educational aspect, there is a very powerful emotional one. I could really just stand there with a bird on my gloved hand and let people gawk. Exclamations of "He's so beautiful," run one over the other as each one comes close to the birds. There is a sort of presence about the birds of prey which is incredibly intense, arresting and awe-inspiring. It has the power to change attitudes, it lends the motivation to inspire action.

In today's Gospel lesson Jesus practices the same sort of powerful presence with His disciples. Jesus has been crucified three days before. The disciples have come together to console one another and to seek protection together against a perceived enemy. If the Jewish leadership had done what it did to Jesus, would not His followers be next? But then there have been some disturbing reports. At first it seemed someone had violated Jesus' grave and taken the body, but then the most amazing and confusing news came in—that some of their number had actually seen Him alive again! You know the women—prone to visions and unstable in all their ways, they had been the first. But then Peter and another disciple had also seen the place. They reported angelic visions, and promises that He was indeed alive. And so the disciples gather in fear of the Jews and wonderment at these reports, awaiting the next development.

They don't have to wait long. In spite of the locked doors Jesus suddenly is standing among them. He gives them His peace, He sends them into the world as He has been sent, and He gives them the Holy Spirit with instructions about sins. One of the number of disciples is not there—Thomas, whose nickname, "Dydimus," means "The Twin." Not only is Thomas not there, but he bucks the news. So Jesus does a repeat performance just for him and gently rebukes him for his inability to believe without seeing.

All of this has to do with the presence of Jesus, that powerful intensity that gives meaning to life in Him. Note the effect of His presence on His disciples. When He appears the first time He does several important things. He does is give them peace—"Peace be with you." They're anything but peaceful right now. The circumstances are dicey at best, but Jesus' peace is not predicated on the circumstances, it is predicated on His presence. Where Jesus is there is peace. Then He sends them out in mission. "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." How did the Father send Jesus? He sent Him to people who didn't want to receive Him, to preach a message they didn't want to hear, to give Himself for their salvation. This is the commissioning of the disciples for mission—to tell people all over the world about Jesus and to give themselves to whatever it takes to bring them to faith in Him.

The last thing He does is give them the Holy Spirit. This is the promised Comforter who will teach them all that He has told them. But here Jesus gives Him a strange role in their lives. They will forgive or retain sins. This passage has been interpreted in many ways, but when you take it in context it makes sense. Jesus has just commissioned them for mission and the Spirit is the power they need to complete the mission. The forgiveness and retention of sin has to do with mission. I understand it to mean, "Do what it takes to bring people to an understanding of who Jesus is. If they accept it and come to faith their sins are forgiven. If they reject it their sins are retained." This is the essence of the mission Jesus gives His disciples, and the power of the Holy Spirit is absolutely essential in completing it. It's like getting your deployment orders and then with them the equipment you need to complete them.

When He appears for Thomas He teaches us two important things. First of all, Jesus' presence is the inspirer of faith. Since the Ascension we know His presence through faith, not sight, and that is the substance of Jesus' gentle rebuke, but His presence through the Spirit is no less essential. Jesus' presence is still the inspirer and instigator of faith. We do not come to faith and then come to Jesus, we come to Jesus and then come to faith. The easiest way you have of sharing your Easter faith is to bring people to the community of faith. Jesus meets us here, He meets them here. The easiest way for you to nurture faith in you is to be with God's people, for Jesus meets with us when we get together, so if He is here His presence will nurture your faith.

Secondly, the body needs all kinds. It is important to Jesus that one of the disciples is not there. Perhaps the other disciples wrote Thomas off in exasperated impatience. He's not a bad guy, just a born skeptic, an engineer type for whom seeing is believing, but nonetheless Jesus comes and meets with Thomas. Even the Thomas's of the world are important in the community of faith. Jesus holds each one of us as important. If Jesus will go to the trouble of a repeat performance for Thomas, He will do for you whatever it is He knows it will take. And so should we. A place to minister for each of God's children is an essential part of the life of the Church.

Yes, "the one not like me" is important to Jesus. If Jesus needs him, so do I. I'm not an engineer type, but I need the engineer types to do what I cannot do even if I do not always understand them. I'm an artist type. You need me, and I need you, and we both need the ones neither of us want to need.

Presence is everything. Jesus told His disciples, "As the Father has sent Me, so I send you." He came bringing the presence of the Father. We go, taking the presence of Jesus. He promised to be with us to the end of the Age. Our mission is no less than to take Christ into the world, that He might redeem and transform it.