

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Easter Sunday 2010
Luke 24:1-10

One of the joys of parenthood and grandparenthood is that they give us a good excuse to go back to some of the best experiences of our own childhoods. My husband feels a sense of warm nostalgia for many parts of his boyhood. And although science has not yet developed a time machine to transport him back to those days, through the wonders of technology he can do the next best thing, which is to order, for his daughters, a DVD of the collected episodes of Gilligan's Island.

The kids have enjoyed watching these shows with him. I often don't know what they pick up until much later. On our trip to New York a few weeks ago, Kendall was a bit surprised to discover that Wall Street turns out to be, in fact, an actual street, which she could go to and walk on. Until then, she had thought of it as a somewhat mythical entity that was very important to Mr. Howell on Gilligan's Island. And really, the popular imagination often describes Wall Street as a mysterious entity with the power either to make dreams come true, or to take the results of a lifetime of hard work and careful savings, and make them vanish. No wonder it seems strange that it would be something as mundane as a street.

The collision of the abstract and the tangible was a big part of the jolt I felt on my pilgrimage to the Holy Land, almost a sense of whiplash. Even the phrase itself, "Holy Land," shows the contrast between something as transcendent as holiness, and something as ordinary as dirt. Going to Bethlehem had seemed like something that happened in the spiritual realm; even "slouching toward Bethlehem" was something that happened in the realm of poetry. How odd to be going to Bethlehem on a bus! My friend Fran had told a child she knew that she was going to go to the place where Jesus was born. The child looked at her with scorn, and exclaimed, "You can't go to where Jesus was born: Jesus was born in Bethlehem!" And it did seem surreal, even to me, that I could go to where Jesus was born.

In Nazareth, at the Church of the Annunciation, I spent a long time trying to take in the message written on the altar: "VERBUM CARO HIC FACTUM EST" which means, "The word was made flesh here." The spiritual world and the physical world

intersecting. And perhaps that child in Fran's congregation speaks for all of us who struggle with the incarnation and the resurrection. Perhaps that child is voicing our own deepest doubts: "You can't go to where Jesus was born." "You can't have the theological exist in a real place." "You can't think the events described in scripture happened in The Real World." "You can't have God and humanity intersect like that."

Fran responded to the child, "Yes, you can."

The sense of "can't" lies at the root of all our doubt and skepticism. The sense of "can't" has been at the root of the doubts and skepticism that people have felt from the very beginning of Christianity. God can't appear in human form. A human being can't be divine. A human being can't rise from the dead. You can't have someone who is fully God and fully human. The "can't" statements have been made in every generation since the beginning of Christianity, and in every generation we proclaim the good news of the gospel. Yes, you can. Yes, you can have God born in human form. Yes, you can have Jesus rise from the dead. Yes, you can have death vanquished forever. God can do these things, so yes, you can experience this God.

The gospel writers include in their accounts the names of places in which events happened, emphasizing that the events occurred in real places, places that were well-known to folks who lived in first-century Jerusalem. Right there on the Mount of Olives, they write, right there at the praetorium. They proclaim that it is here in the Real World that God is at work. The world of dirt and stones, the world of flesh and blood. They know how strong the attitude of "can't" is, and how important it is to break through it. By traveling along on my pilgrimage through the Holy Land, the places I had always thought of theologically or symbolically turned out to be real places. It was finally sinking in that VERBUM CARO HIC FACTUM EST," "The word was made flesh here."

As much as we could, we followed in the steps of Jesus, going in order to the places Jesus went during his lifetime, discovering how these physical, tangible places enriched our sense of the physical, tangible man Jesus. As we listened to the scriptures in these places, we got a sense of a man who walked and sailed, who drank wine and ate fish, who shouted and wept. We got a sense of a man who talked about God in terms of sheep and vines, water and rocks, cities and storms. We got a sense of a man who lived

and died. After we walked the stations of the cross along the Via Dolorosa on Friday, we ended up at the site where crucifixions took place.

There is strong archaeological and historical evidence for the location of a stone quarry in Jerusalem, outside the ancient city walls, in which Jerusalem's crucifixions were carried out. There is also strong archaeological and historical evidence for the location of tombs carved into the vertical Western wall of that quarry. People of first century Jerusalem would have known very well the location of the "Place of the Skull" which was called "Golgotha" or "Calvary." As first-century Christians talked about the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, it seems extremely likely that they would go back to the places where those events happened. There are written records in the early 300's of Christians having already preserved the tradition of where the crucifixion and burial happened. In the 300's, Emperor Constantine made it socially acceptable for residents of Jerusalem to practice their faith. When Constantine had a church built on this site in 326, he already had plenty of tradition, and perhaps Christian graffiti, to indicate where the site was. So the evidence that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is built on the site of Calvary and the tombs of those who died there during the lifetime of Jesus is actually very strong.

There are huge crowds of people who come to visit the site of the crucifixion and resurrection, so all day long the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is very, very crowded, with very long lines to pray at the site of the crucifixion, and even longer lines to pray at the site of the empty tomb. And then when it's your turn you need to make it short so that the people behind you in line get a turn.

So I was glad that I was given the opportunity to stay in the church overnight, to make the transition from Saturday night to Sunday morning, with its celebrations of the resurrection. There were some monks, priests, and nuns of various denominations who were around, going about their tasks and their prayers, and a few other pilgrims, but no crowds.

The church rises up above ground level in a magnificent dome, covered with some glorious mosaics. But the church also goes down several levels dug deep into the rock. In many places of the lower levels you can see the actual rock Calvary is made of, and at the lowest level the wall itself is made of the rock. As one priest put it, the rock of Calvary

itself is meaningful as the "givenness" of the incarnation. And then there is the rock of devotion, the rock of various people over the centuries who have built the church and added their gifts of architecture, sculpture, painting, iconography, and art. As you walk up the stairs, you can see the places where pilgrims from centuries before have carved small crosses into the rock of the walls. Rows of crosses, each carved by a pilgrim I will never meet, but who prayed here before me. They do not carve their initials into the rock, to assert their own identity; they carve a cross, the symbol of why they have come here. And seeing all the crosses together feels like a community from all over the world, from across generations. I did not carve my own cross in the rock, but I traced my finger over their crosses with the same motion I use to make the sign of the cross on the foreheads of this congregation. It is the sign I make in oil on our foreheads in our healing service. It is the sign I make on our foreheads in ashes on Ash Wednesday. And it was the sign I made on George's forehead before I left, wondering whether that that might be the last time I saw him before he became a pilgrim to the heavenly Jerusalem.

It was a gift to be in a holy place, and a gift to have holy time. A whole night in which I had no tasks to accomplish and could be devoted to prayer. I had time to pray for so many friends, relatives, and parishioners, to pray for so many situations. And to pray in thanksgiving and adoration. I lit candles. I sat quietly. I strolled around the church. I looked at beautiful art. I meditated on suffering. I read the passion narratives of each of the synoptic gospels. I prayed some more.

The church has a shabby little back chapel with nothing in it but the most falling-apart, worn-out altar I've ever seen, and walls in which there is enough color to see that they were probably beautiful a very long time ago, but now have stains from a fire, and some of the walls and ceilings have disintegrated. There is a tiny opening on one side that leads into a cave. The cave has an oil lamp hanging on the wall, and some wire mesh on which people have lit some small candles. And inside the cave, there are two graves which have been dated back to the time of Jesus. They are not what we think of as graves; they are simply openings carved into the rough-hewn rock, just big enough to hold a human body. We had learned about them when we came as a group, and I peeked in. They were dark, and they had a little bit of trash in them: an empty water bottle, little scraps of paper, a little dirt.

But I realized that during my night in the church, before I went into the place where the resurrection happened, I wanted to lie down in one of those tombs. This was a better opportunity to lie in a first-century tomb than I would ever get in my lifetime. I crawled in head first, and found that it sloped downward a little bit. There were some spider webs on the walls, but otherwise it was just hollowed out rock, and my own body.

I stayed as long as it took for my candle to burn out, and then a little longer in the darkness. I thought about life and death. My life and death. Jesus' life and death.

And then, as part of the gift of not being dead, I was able to crawl back out of the tomb. I entered the edicule, the structure within the church that houses the empty tomb of the resurrection. There is an entryway surrounded by oil lamps and candles, and then a little hall, and then an anteroom where a few nuns were praying, outside the small room with the empty tomb. I knelt down in the anteroom with the nuns and prayed there, and after a while the three people who were praying at the empty tomb came out, and one of the nuns went in, and after a little while another nun motioned for me to go in. It was nice to go in and pray alongside the nun, and nice to pray alone after she'd left.

I was amazed and deeply grateful to be in this holy place, to have this holy time, to come to the culmination of my pilgrimage. I thought to myself, "it is good to be here." And as I reflected a bit on the holiness of this place, I saw the inscription in Latin: "NON EST HIC SED SURREXIT." "He is not here, but has risen." They are the words the angels say to the women in today's gospel reading.

And that is the paradoxical gift of the resurrection, the gift that completes and perfects the gift of the incarnation. I had come halfway around the world to visit the Holy Land because Jesus was **HERE**, and I wanted to make a pilgrimage to holy places. And then I discovered the true destination of my pilgrimage, that what makes this place a holy place is not that Jesus was here; what makes this the most holy place of all is that Jesus is **NOT** here. Christ is risen.

Because of the resurrection, Christ is no longer limited to one place in the world. Because of the resurrection Christ is no longer limited to the space that a human body takes up. Because of the resurrection, Christ is no longer limited to one generation. Our doubts may tell us that you can't have faith in something that breaks through the

limitations of space and matter and time. But the message of today's sermon is, "Yes, you can." Because what really matters is not what we can do, or where we can go. What really matters is what God can do, and where God can go. God can do anything. God can go to Heathsville Virginia and make it a holy place. God can live in your soul, and make it a holy place. God can be alive now, and make this a holy time.

Jesus is not in the edicule of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The good news of the gospel is Christ is risen! Alleluia!