

Sermon preached at Gisborne, Easter Sunday, 12 April 2020

Open our ears to hear your Word proclaimed in this place. Open our hearts to know your Love offered in this congregation. Open our eyes to see your Presence blessing us in this moment. In Jesus' name, Amen.

John 20:1-18; Colossians 3:1-14

Easter - Continuity and transformation

Happy Easter, everyone. We are living in lockdown week three, and we are about to meet our risen Lord in this strange situation. But don't be disheartened. Just imagine that we are Jesus' disciples who gather in the upper room. All the doors are locked. We are here to celebrate Easter in this virtual church. Next thing we'll celebrate is that we are maintaining our bubbles so well. No one is sick by COVID 19 in our midst. And we are about to begin to explore one of fascinating Easter stories from which Christianity came into being. Whenever you read about Easter, what fascinates you the most? For me, it is the story we read today in John. What fascinates me the most is that no one was able to recognize the risen Lord until Jesus helped them. Why is it so? This question will be our starting point today. First, we'll find what continued and what was transformed in the risen Jesus. Second, what made the disciples fail to recognize him, and what helped them to do so will be followed. Lastly, we'll explore continuity and transformation in disciples' lives.

1. Continuity and transformation in the risen Lord

Recognition of the risen Jesus is crucial in our faith journey. Many of us may have had such a moment of encountering the risen Jesus at some stage. There will be time that we can share it with one another. As we read, John reports that when Jesus was risen, the disciples couldn't recognize him at all in the first place. John is not alone. Writers of other gospels and books in the New Testament report the same things. For instance, In Luke's gospel, the two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked and talked with the risen Jesus for a while before they recognized him in the breaking of their bread (Luke 24:31, 35). In John 21, Jesus was standing on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias and talking with the disciples about fishing, before finally, the Beloved Disciple recognizes him.¹ As presumed, there may be reasons for such difficult recognitions: perhaps the disciples may not have expected to see the risen Jesus really despite Jesus' words.² Or it may be because that the risen Jesus had undergone a change from the Jesus was in ministry when he was with them.

In his discussion of resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:42 onwards, Paul brings out a twofold aspect of continuity and transformation of resurrection. Paul speaks of the resurrection of a body (soma: σῶμα) that has died and been buried; yet that body (soma: σῶμα) is changed so that it is no longer physical but spiritual.³ But here, this spiritual body is not such a ghost-like body that we may imagine because the body is also able to do what a physical body would do. For example, the risen Jesus came and stood before the disciples, even though the door was locked.⁴ It shows that the risen Jesus was able to go through the locked door. In another occasion, the risen Jesus asked his disciples to give him something to eat to make them sure that he was alive.⁵ It tells us a few important things. First, there is continuity, such as the relationship with the disciples as he loved them to the end.⁶ But there is also a transformation on which the continuity is based. But the transformation doesn't occur to the risen Jesus only. It also happened to those who recognized the risen Lord. That is, encountering the risen Jesus also transformed people. It led them to a new life which couldn't hold the old lives any longer as they clothed themselves with Christ.⁷ So we'll explore the passage from this point.

¹ John 21:5 Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No."

² Matthew 16:21

³ 1 Corinthians 15:44 - It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. (σπείρεται σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν. Εἶ ἔστιν σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἔστιν καὶ πνευματικόν.)

⁴ John 20:19

⁵ Luke 24:41-43

While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" (42) They gave him a piece of broiled fish, (43) and he took it and ate in their Presence.

⁶ John 13:1 - Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

⁷ Galatians 3:27; Romans 13:14

2. *Recognition of the risen Jesus – failure and success*

Mary Magdalene only knows Jesus after he calls her by name. Before that, she has searched earnestly for Jesus; she has consulted the disciples, the angels, and the supposed gardener about the removal of his body (vv. 2, 13, 15). Yet when she sees Jesus, she does not recognize him. It implies that mere sight of the risen Jesus does not necessarily lead to understanding or faith. When Jesus calls her by her name, that's when she is able to recognize Jesus. As before she was trying to hold on to Jesus by calling him 'Rabbouni.' But Jesus doesn't want Mary to hold on to him as in the past. He tells her to go back to the faith community to deliver the good news of the resurrection. Painful though, Mary has to let her past understanding and wishes go to receive the new reality. This letting go of the old self is the moment of transformation. Mary, together with other disciples, will continue their faith journey but only through transformation.

The same goes with the Lucan narrative of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Luke records, "While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.⁸" It is only when Jesus breaks the bread they have the means of recognizing Jesus' Presence in their midst. The act of breaking the bread has already contained the elements of continuity and transformation. When a loaf of bread is broken into smaller pieces, they are given to many others to be consumed. Like a seed does in the soil, the bread is now being absorbed into the body. It is transformed into energy that the body needs. All examples indicate that people who are able to recognize Jesus have to be transformed in one way or the other.

3. *Continuity and transformation in the lives of the disciples*

Life, after recognizing the risen Jesus is different from life before. In Acts, Saul encountered the risen Lord on the way to Damascus. He didn't see the risen Jesus physically but only through the voice of Jesus.

'Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁹

Saul was in great shock as the encounter with the risen Jesus made his life upside down. Saul not only became blind physically, but he lost his old self in darkness for three days and three nights. It may have been a death-like experience as his known world had utterly collapsed. After he was able to see again, Saul was a different person. He may be looked the same on the surface, but his inner self had entirely transformed into a new person to become a servant of God.

In our little story of 'Hope for the flowers,' we can see the same elements of 'continuity and transformation' in the life of Strip and Yellow. Strip had a goal to reach the top of caterpillar pillars, but nothing was there. He was only able to see other caterpillar pillars. He couldn't continue to ascend but to descend. After transformation, did Stripe or Yellow lose the continuity of their lives? No. Instead, their transformation not only liberated them from the previous old lives but also became a hope for the flowers – others' lives, too.

In John, faith is always used as a verb form. When the beloved disciple believed as he saw the linen wrapping lying in the tomb, "...he saw and **believed**."¹⁰ The word 'to believe' doesn't merely mean a nominal belief, but it entails ongoing transformation based on actions.

What was/is your encounter with the risen Jesus? Have you met him and transformed, or are you still looking for someone/something that may liberate you from your present life conditions? John's gospel together with Colossian 3:1-14 tells this vital thing: the risen Lord who had liberated and who is still liberating us from the bondage of life cannot be found by one's wishes or desires, or through human understanding. Instead, we were/are found by the risen Lord through mysterious ways. In Christianity, we call it grace by God. Recognition of the risen Lord inevitably entails our transformation too. It means that there is no turning back to old lives as if Stripe and Yellow, who now transformed into butterflies cannot go back to their past caterpillar lives. This new life, however, offers more life abundantly. May Lord help us see the risen Jesus every day so that our lives are renewed, which will transform others' lives in Christ too. Amen.

⁸ Luke 24:14-15

⁹ Acts 9:3-4

¹⁰ John 20:8 - τότε οὖν εἰσῆλθεν καὶ ὁ ἄλλος μαθητὴς ὁ ἐλθὼν πρῶτος εἰς τὸ μνημεῖον καὶ εἶδεν καὶ ἐπίστευσεν.