Invitation to the Table

In a Scripture usually associated with Advent, the prophet Isaiah spoke to King Ahaz and said, "*Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.* (ISAIAH 7:14)

In EPHESIANS 2:13-16 we read, "*[Christ] reconciles us all to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.*

The crowds shouted "Hosanna!" on Sunday and "Crucify him!" on Friday; and we think—maybe you don't think, but I think—"I'd never flip-flop like that!"

But the Bible probes deeper. We weren't there; so, here and now, where do I look away when things seems off; where do I stay silent; where do I convince myself, "This isn't my responsibility"?

The moment we tell ourselves the truth about ourselves we find that we were never alone. Yes, the cross tells us something about us—about our silence, our avoidance, the way we get things wrong. But more importantly, it tells us something about God: that God does not walk away. Jesus was called Immanuel (God with us); and that's a forever thing.

We get the preposition wrong in Ephesians when we read that "through the cross" God breaks down the wall that divides us. The usual interpretation is "by means of the cross. God used the cross." But the cross was not God's plan; it had nothing to do with grace. It was a human response to noncompliance; it was the barricade God moved *through* to accomplish God's intentions and purposes.

It is resurrection, not the cross, that accomplishes God's intentions and purposes. However you interpret resurrection, that's how God moved *through* and beyond the cross.

And that's why we gather at this table every week, to remember Immanuel—God with us. Forever.

Our hymn of Communion is #422 "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ."

Pastoral Prayer

God, who raised Jesus and who is always making all things new, in the joy and hope of this Easter morning, we sing Alleluia with full hearts. Love is stronger than Death!

In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, we know some who are bewildered and sad. We pray for those that have lost hope, for those who suffer from grief, loneliness, and fear. In our joy give us the grace of empathy.

In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, we acknowledge those places and peoples in our world where death and domination rule, where imperial powers ignore the poor, where war never ends, where children are hungry and parents grieve because they cannot provide, where death abounds senselessly. In our joy, give us the grace of empathy.

In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, teach us the depth and breadth of what it means to be your Easter people. Remind us that, since we are raised with Christ, sometimes we are called to go into difficult places to work for justice and new life for your people and your Creation.

In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, grant us insight to bear witness to the promise of resurrection, to hold those in despair, and to teach them that Love is stronger than death.

In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, give us the courage to bear your living Love in every corner of our lives, so that your peaceable realm will come, here on earth, as it is in heaven.

In the name of the Risen Christ, we pray,

Alleluia! Amen.

Raised with Christ

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 (NRSVUE) *Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.* ***2****Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth,* ***3****for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.* ***4****When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*

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The Word of God for the people of God!

"We Have Seen the Risen Lord!" I read through the resurrection narratives in the Gospels this week, and, maybe because we'd been rehearsing this song, the greeting of Mary Magdalene in John stood out for me. Mary had been to the tomb and Jesus had spoken with her; and she returned to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord!"

It just struck me how much more powerful that statement is in contrast to our traditional third person Easter greeting: "Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!" "I have seen the Lord."

There's just something convincing about an eyewitness report. And the question comes up: "Have we seen the Lord?" Or maybe, "Where have we seen the Lord?" Jesus said whatever we do to the least of his brothers and sisters, we do to him. Does that not imply that in the least of his brothers and sisters "We Have Seen the Lord"?

In today's epistle reading, Paul begins, "Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ…" When a passage begins with the word, "Therefore," I know I've missed something earlier that sets up the passage. So, I went back.

Paul has been disputing false teachers: religious groups using magic and rites of initiation into the mysteries of the universe. They called their teachings "philosophy; Paul called it (2:8) ***"empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental principles of the world, and not according to Christ."***

And then he adds some Jewish laws. Now, Paul loved the law as descriptive of the perfect life God intends for humanity and for the relationship between humanity that reflects the human relationship with God. But the Temple Oligarchy had made the law into rigid requirements and some Jewish converts to Christianity were holding on to those legalistic requirements and insisting that they be applied to Gentile converts—especially circumcision and food laws.

But Paul argues that Christ (vs. 2:9) "… is ruler over all these 'earthly things'—these cult philosophies and legalistic requirements. *Therefore…*

"Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ…" For Paul, resurrection is not just a one-and-done thing that happened to Jesus; resurrection is a reality in which all of God's people live. And while it might be splitting hairs, for Paul the significance of the resurrection is not that Christ rose but that God raised him! And in his epistle to the church in Rome (8:11) he writes, ***"…[the same one] who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you."***

"…to your mortal bodies also…" Now I have no wish to diminish the elements of salvation and eternal life that are tied to the events of Good Friday and Easter. But virtually everyone within reach of any expression of Christianity already has some idea of what all that means for eternity some day; and in the emphasis on some day, another crucial part of the Gospel gets overlooked; namely, the hear and now.

Jesus came preaching "The kingdom of God is here! This is it!" And when Paul writes ***"Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, …Set your minds on the things that are above, not on the things that are on earth…"*** he means right here—right now!

The spatial categories (above/below, heaven/earth, over/under, etc.) are often used in the New Testament to indicate value and meaning. "Therefore, having been raised with Christ", we live at a different level—here and now.

We get distracted and lost when the conversation focuses on whether Jesus' dead body physically got up and walked around and talked and ate with people. Those conversations distract us from the witness that on that weekend *SOMETHING HAPPENED* that changed those cowering, terrified disciples cringing behind locked doors.

However you interpret resurrection, what is undeniable is that people were changed and so was their understanding of the intentions and purposes of God. And because of what happened to them, they redirected the course of religious history.

And the witness of the New Testament is that that same thing can happen to us; with the same results. Again, from Paul's letter to Rome (12:2), ***"Do not be conformed to this age*** [in contrast to "the age to come"]***, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and complete."***

'…things above, not things on earth'—*not these cult philosophies and legalistic rules* … 'be transformed'—Paul is projecting that stream of Old Testament and Jewish tradition that emphasized repentance, transformation and devotion to God—and it comes together in today's reading, "since we have been raised with Christ."

I appreciate Marcus' comment that for resurrection to happen, something has to die. And over and over again Paul writes about "our old self" dying and being raised with Christ. Our baptism symbolizes our faith that we are "buried with Christ in baptism; raised to walk in newness of life."

So, what changed in those disciples? I don't know; but what I see the results! In the New Testament witness, because of resurrection they showed up. They came out from behind locked doors and showed up.

Our Maundy Thursday service was built on the old spiritual, "Were You There (When They Crucified My Lord)?" I awakened Friday morning reflecting on the power of being there—showing up and experiencing the radical presence of God that song implies.

More than two thousand years after what we remembered Thursday night, this song speaks to the reality of right here, right now: "Were you—was I—were we there?"

Have we showed up where people are suffering and bearing their own crosses.

"Showing up" is not accomplished by crossing the threshold of a church; although our worship experiences are intended to strengthen us ***to*** "show up." But the cross is a place of public spectacle, and "since we have been raised with Christ" we live at a different level. Since we have been raised with Christ we live in the radical presence of the God whose grace is not impeded by the obstacle of the cross; and therefore, since we have been raised with Christ we are empowered to "show up" at the cross of those who suffer and those who have been put down by injustice.

Martin Luther King, Jr. showed up and led hundreds of others who showed up in Selma and Birmingham, risking the dogs and water hoses. And, since we are raised with Christ, many of us continue to show up in the battle of racism by contributing to our church's Reconciliation Offering.

Through our Week of Compassion offering, we were "there"— when the levees broke during Hurricane Katrina and when the earthquake shook Haiti. And, since we are raised with Christ, we'll be there when the next natural disaster strikes and the vulnerable are scrambling for shelter.

Now, I'm not running a commercial for our special day outreach offerings; but don't undervalue the ways some of us are "showing up," maybe without realizing it: in the battle for health care for the uninsured—in protesting the cuts to educational funding. We show up through our participation in public demonstrations and through letters to congressmen and senators, since we are raised with Christ and focus on things above.

Since we are raised with Christ, some of us show up in the hospitals and Nursing Homes to comfort the sick and encourage the lonely.

Paul concludes today's reading with these words: ***"When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*** Is it possible that, since we are raised with Christ, when we show up, somebody can say, "I have seen the Lord?"

Like the resurrection of Jesus, being raised with Christ is not a one-and-done thing. Our card isn't punched when we contribute to missions or write letters to legislators. Resurrection is an ongoing reality, a lifestyle that reflects things above—the values and principles that describe the perfect life God intends for humanity and for the relationship between us humans that reflects the intended human relationship with God.

The lyrics of "Were You There?" continue with the words "Oh, sometimes it causes me to tremble! Tremble! Tremble!" May we never lose our vulnerability to trembling—to being deeply affected —by injustice and suffering. May we never cease to tremble in the presence of a holy God who calls us to the work of justice and peace.

> ***Therefore, since you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, …not on the things that are on earth, [3]for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.*** The Word of God for the people of God!