

The First Sunday after Easter

By the Rev'd John Crews

Epistle 1 St. John v. 4., *Gospel* St. John xx. 19.

+In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

As I began to write this sermon, my son lay in a hospital, a cannula taped under his nose and an IV feeding him steroids in an effort to help him breathe. He's been in the Pediatric ICU since Good Friday, begging to go home, to school, to see his sister.

It's been a unique way to commemorate the Resurrection, to say the least. As I've prayed and begged for his recovery, combined with the remembrance of Jesus's salvation wrought for us upon the cross, one cannot help but to ask why? Not just why must my son endure something of which he can have no understanding and something he will have to endure the rest of his life, but 'why' all of *this*? What is the point of this new life we have entered into? All of us here have rightly concluded that it must mean more than mere ordinary human flourishing. We see those espousing the so-called 'Prosperity Gospel' as a cheapened and debased Gospel. And yet, we cannot eschew human flourishing outright. For God's incarnation in the flesh redeems all that we are, our selves, our souls, AND our bodies. We are creatures of spirit AND body, and we should never be too quick to overly spiritualize what the Kingdom of Heaven entails. For history is replete with those who attempted to forsake the flesh for the mysticism of the spirit, only to be all too susceptible to the flesh's temptations.

That there is great temptation as well as great suffering in the flesh reveals its power. Genesis chapter 6 tells of Angels, beings of pure spirit, so enraptured by the flesh that even they proved powerless to overcome its temptations. And yet I wonder, how was it that these creatures of spirit nevertheless had the ability to beget life? Why? We know why *we* can create life; it's how we fulfill God's commandment to be fruitful and multiply, but why did the angels have that ability? Was it a corruption of some gift that was intended for other purposes? If so, what purposes?

But then I began to ponder our own resurrections in the New Creation, wondering what we'll all be doing. I think of the human hand, how it can wield a paintbrush or a blade that in the hands of a skilled surgeon, saves a life. The hand

can build enduring monuments, and it can also smash them to rubble. These things that sit on the end of our arms can achieve wonders, but what if we have no idea what their true intent is? What if what we've put them to use doing is but the merest hint and glimmer of what their true intended purpose, God's purpose is for them?

But that answer lays in the future and so again I ask why? Why does the glory of the New Creation often remain so distant? Hasn't the Kingdom been inaugurated? Isn't *here*, in *this* place, with us, as the body of Christ? And yet, sin and death, suffering and despair abound. We give up, or at least try to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil but what replaces them? I'm reminded of a line from the movie Tombstone when someone tells Wyatt Earp that he's never seen a rich man who didn't wind up with a guilty conscience and Earp replies, "Already got a guilty conscience. Might as well have the money, too."

But I realized something as my son sat stuck in the hospital. Why is the journey after our baptism so often fraught with hazards? Why is there so much pain and suffering yet to endure? And why doesn't our relationship with God always make our suffering easier to endure, and more than that, it can often seem to make our suffering more acute? I think the answer is we are all, each of us in the hospital.

We finally admitted to ourselves that we should go to the doctor; we've been admitted, and now we're undergoing treatment. It'd be awesome if we could experience a miraculous cure, but that's not the work being done to save us in this hospital.

My son is home now. Barring a miracle, either medical or direct divine intervention, my son will have severe asthma and the complications that go with it for the rest of his life. As he grows older and his body adapts, developing antibodies against the viruses that now cause a cascade of reactions that result in hospitalization, he may in time overcome this affliction, but that time is not this time. This time is one suffering. As Christians, we expect to suffer for our Faith. The reality of the powers and principalities of this world arrayed against us has never been shielded from us. Jesus was quite upfront about it and as the history of the Church shows, a life in Christ will always result in a martyrdom of some kind.

But needless suffering seems not just pointless but outright cruel. In our sober moments we can see the disconnect of ‘I’ll suffer this but not that’, ‘I’ll suffer a martyr’s death for Christ but don’t make me endure cancer’. But that doesn’t make cancer any less cruel or pointless.

But while I cannot offer any profound theological reflections on suffering’s purpose because in the midst of suffering they all sound empty and hollow, like the words ‘hang in there’ shouted from outside the pit while you’re stuck at the bottom of it, I can say this, suffering is worth it. We can say, as Christ proclaims in the Gospel, “Peace be unto you,” even in the midst of the suffering. Life is worth it and oftentimes, suffering is the only thing itself that can teach us that fact.

Life, this life is worth living and in Christ we come to know that without Him, we weren’t really living, we were merely surviving, grasping onto whatever bits of happiness, pleasure, distraction, or scraps of meaning we could hold onto before the inevitable end. Now, though, we are alive, quickened is the ancient phrase meaning to be made alive, to have the breath of life breathed in us. Now we live in newness of life and this life, even before all things are made new, is still worth a price beyond compare.

But in order to live anew, we must be made whole and so we continue to undergo treatment at the hospital. We enter into this hospital for emergencies but also for our chronic conditions. We can understand the metaphor in the case of emergencies but we tend to chafe at it in the case of chronic conditions. But the fact is, we suffer under an affliction, and for most of us, more than one. They will not be lifted from us in the miraculous way we desire not because God refuses or wants to punish us but because they cannot be removed without us ceasing to be who we are. You are not you minus certain weaknesses as if there is some ideal ‘you’ and if you only had a capacity for numbers, a quicker wit, enjoyed small talk, or had a different set of eyes, then you’d be the ‘you’ you were meant to be. You are not the ‘you’ who never made your mistakes, that version of ourselves is one of pure imagination and that false idol of self must be put to death just as surely as our sinful, old man.

Your sins, my sins, our sins are not some separate, foreign body invading our lives. They were birthed inside us, nurtured by us, and set loose on the world by us.

Until we understand that, until we acknowledge our weakness and accept them as a part of ourselves, then there is little hope for our recovery.

In other words, we overcome our weakness not by their erasure but by their integration. Now there are issues with the use of the term ‘integration,’ it can smack of psychobabble and can conjure images of 10 second Tik Tok reels hawking some therapeutic self-actualization, click link in description or DM me for access to my plan.

So perhaps another word is needed, and there might be none better than incarnation. For as Christ became incarnate, taking into Himself feeble flesh, not just corruptible, but actively corrupting, shedding death with every dead cell, with every flake of skin.

But in taking on weakness He manifested even greater glory. He incorporated our weakness into His greatness, not overcoming weakness by its elimination but manifesting glory in suffering their effects. As we see in this morning’s Gospel lesson, He still bears the scars of His suffering in His glorified body. So too, we will be made glorious in our trials and sufferings, in our pains and traumas, if we would only allow Him to treat us.

But like Christ, we shall still bear our scars, as He showed the Apostles His wounds, so too must we show Him ours. And we shall be healed, but healing leaves a mark, evidence of what was healed, bearing witness of His love for us and our faith in Him.

It is in this hospital of life that we learn to live, living through our afflictions, our sufferings, and our failings, incorporating them into our redemption, redeeming our suffering, overcoming not by suffering’s removal but by holding fast to the reality that it is only suffering *precisely* because there is a longing for and hope in something, someone, at the end of all suffering. In Him we find eternal life. Just as through His scars He bears witness to His love for us, His healing of our wounds and our incarnation of our weaknesses, we bear witness to that love. As St. John writes in today’s Epistle, “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son [of God]* hath not life.”

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