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Sermon John 20:19-29 and Belief in the Incarnation

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John 20:19-29 and Belief in the Incarnation

By

Scott G. Sinclair

The central affirmation of the Christian faith is that the man Jesus of Nazareth is the human life of God. This claim is central to the Nicene Creed, the primary statement of what Christians believe, and which we will soon recite. The eternal word is “God from God, light from light . . . of one being with the Father.” This eternal word, “came down from heaven . . . became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.” Today's gospel gives us a briefer affirmation of the same faith. Jesus even in his risen glory is still fully human, so human that the nail holes in his hands and the spear wound in his side are still clearly visible. Yet in response Thomas hails him as Lord and God.

It was only at the resurrection that followers of Jesus realized that he was divine. Yes, during his ministry Jesus preached with amazing authority, worked miracles, and proclaimed the coming of God's kingdom. Yet, even so, his followers assumed that he was only a great human being. Nowhere in the gospels does a disciple proclaim that Jesus is divine during his earthly ministry. That proclamation began after Jesus rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, and they recognized him for whom he had always been, the human life of God.

It must be admitted that the idea that a crucified human being was divine is weird and so, not surprisingly, is unique to Christianity. Islam rejects the idea that the One God could become human. In the Quran we read in response to Christian claims, “God does not beget and is not begotten.” And Islam which honors Jesus as a prophet even insists that he was not crucified. In some religions a god does come down and temporarily assume a human form. In Hinduism, for example, the great god Krishna has various incarnations. But during them he never gets killed and buried. Such a fate would be inconceivable. And it is natural to question both the power and even the rationality of a god who so weakened and degraded himself to be tortured to death and buried. Saint Paul freely admitted—indeed proclaimed—the absurdity of the idea. Here is what he wrote in his first letter to the church in Corinth: “Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”

Those to whom the risen Christ appeared learned by direct experience that Jesus was divine, and we have their testimony. The gospels record that some women went to the tomb in which the body of Jesus had been placed and found the tomb empty and had an experience that he had risen from the dead. We may

note in passing that even some skeptical scholars acknowledge that the story of women finding an empty tomb could not have been made up. The followers of Jesus would not have fabricated a story in which *women* found the empty tomb. In the first century the testimony of women was not considered reliable. Women could not even testify in a Jewish court. The gospels also record that Jesus then appeared to the male disciples of Jesus. In today's reading from John's Gospel Jesus appears first to the disciples without Thomas and then appears to the disciples when Thomas is present. And Thomas, despite his previous skepticism, acknowledges that Jesus is divine by addressing him as, "My Lord and my God!"

But this morning's gospel acknowledges that the risen Christ did not appear to everyone on that first Easter and by implication does not appear to us today. Indeed, Jesus actually pronounces a blessing on those to whom he did not appear if they nevertheless believe in him. He says to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Those to whom Jesus does not appear continue to have access to him through the Holy Spirit. In today's gospel Jesus gives the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is not for the first disciples only. The Holy Spirit is also for those who were not present when the risen Christ appeared, and the Holy Spirit continues to be present to us now.

The Spirit is especially two things: First, the Holy Spirit is an invisible power, and second, the Holy Spirit is the mind of Christ. The Spirit is power. The words for "spirit" in the biblical languages also mean "wind" or "breath." Note that in today's gospel Jesus *breathes* on the disciples and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." Breath or wind are invisible. We cannot see them. But they have power. They have the power to destroy in a tornado, but they also have the power to provide energy in a windmill and even the power to give life in artificial respiration. So too the Holy Spirit has transforming power in our own individual lives and in our collective life as the church, the continuing body of Christ. And the Spirit is the mind of God, as Donald Gelpi, the great theologian of the Spirit, insisted. The Spirit helps us to see both ourselves and the world, not as the world sees, but as God sees.

The Spirit allows us to see that God becoming human and suffering on the cross is not a sign of weakness and foolishness. Instead, God submitting to the limitations that every human being must face is the supreme sign of God's

unimaginable love and the supreme sign that God calls us to become like Jesus in his self-sacrificing life for others.

And it is the Spirit which testifies to the reality of Jesus's resurrection and the reality of our own coming resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. We already have that Spirit in our innermost selves and in this community. We experience that power now. And because we already feel that power, we can with confidence anticipate that through the power of the Spirit we too will at our own death rise from this life to a new and greater life as Jesus did. We will join Jesus in heaven and there reign with him forever.