

Earthly things, wombs and the resurrection of the dead
St. John 3:1-21

In 1968 when I first re-entered the Christian faith as an adult, I took a class (like an adult confirmation program) at the Congregational church Sylvia and I attended. This is where I learned about and fell in love with theology. It just made sense to me. Mostly. Pastor Ross grew quickly accustomed to my raised hand in the back row as I waited to ask clarifying, and at times, belligerent questions. The week he taught us about the Apostles' Creed, I remember finding the line I believe in the resurrection of the dead to be particularly difficult to believe.

Given various states of decomposition not to mention cremation, it hardly made sense that at some point human bodies would all rise from the earth. I couldn't shake the image of it all looking like an end times Thriller video. Half decayed arms reaching through soil and zombie women in tom vintage dresses! (To saying nothing of the arguments my mother-the Presbyterian - and I had about this!!)

My mind couldn't make any logical sense out of it so I was sure that this was something we didn't really have to believe, given how a-rational it is. So raising my hand from the back row, I said "Um, do we have to believe that actual bodies are going to rise from the dead, because that's just crazy." Expecting him to say of course not, it's really just a metaphor and was shocked when instead, Pastor Ross just looked at me and unapologetically said, "*Yes, Wayne, actual bodies.*"

I mention this because I kind of relate to Nicodemus from our Gospel reading. It says that he was Pharisee - a studied man and a religious scholar - who came to Jesus by night raising his hand from the darkness of the back row to ask him some clarifying, if belligerent questions. See, Nicodemus was just trying to wrap his brain around this Jesus thing. He was looking for some basic facts. And trying to apply his reasoning to what he was experiencing about Jesus, he too was finding it all a little crazy.

Even to the point of saying one of the most dumb-ass things ever recorded in scripture. Jesus said you have to be born anew, or born from above and literal minded, logical Nicodemus says to Jesus, "*what? like, go back into your mom's womb?*" It's a graphic image we could all do without, and I can only imagine how this made everyone totally cringe when he said it.

But I feel for him. Because in typical Jesus fashion he doesn't really answer the question but says even more crazy sounding stuff, like the wind blows where it chooses and that's what being born of spirit is like, and then some stuff about Moses lifting up snakes in the wilderness.

And exactly none of it is very helpful in providing some facts that our minds can make sense of. Basically because the Gospel just isn't like that. There's no reason for the church to lean toward anti-intellectualism but the thing is, The Gospel is not domesticatable enough for the mind to grasp. It's wilder than that. Like wind. It's more beautiful and a-rational than reason alone can contain.

That's why we need *stuff* and not just *ideas*. I've heard it said that Christianity isn't spiritual (or, I would add, intellectual) it's material. You can't even get started without a river, some bread and a jug of wine.

I understand Nicodemus' desire for this all to make sense. I do. But instead of a religion revealed through philosophical constructs - easily reasoned out and understood, instead we get a God inconveniently revealed in people, and food and wine and water and bodies and pies and oil.

When God chose to come and take on human flesh and walk the earth and break bread with friends it was as though God was baptizing the material. As though to say "*stop looking for me in the heavens when you aren't even close to understanding the majesty of a loaf of bread,*" or as Jesus puts it, "*if you can't understand earthly things you'll never understand heavenly things.*"

And understanding the heavenly within the earthly, the transcendent within the mundane, is not an intellectual logical, reason-based experience. You can't make the gospel make sense by using your head. You have to use your hands. And eyes, and mouth, and ears and nose. Because the kingdom of heaven, as Jesus says, is At HAND, reach out and touch it, see it, eat it, feel it. In other words, take in the glory of God in the common, unexpected and totally crazy ways in which our Lord Jesus Christ still seems to be redeeming us.

The next time we see Nicodemus, later in St. John's Gospel, he is trying to defend Jesus against his fellow Pharisees. Many want to kill Jesus, who's still ranting nonstop about blood and bread and light and salvation, but Nicodemus, who clearly still doesn't get it, says rather weakly that maybe they should give Jesus a hearing and learn the facts. There won't be any facts, of course, until the unavoidable fact of the cross. Which is where, against all logic, we meet Nicodemus for the last time.

And we know he finally *got it* because when we meet him again in Chapter 19 he is doing something crazy. He is carrying a 100# of oils and spices. He takes the broken and yet to be resurrected body of his Lord Jesus, and he wraps it lovingly in myrrh and aloe and strips of cloth. It seems a pound or two of such things would have done the trick.

But instead, Nicodemus casts his crown of logic and philosophy at the foot of the cross of Jesus and instead picks up an embarrassingly extravagant amount of stuff. .. material, earthly, touchable, carry-able stuff and does what he can in the light of such love. He got it. Or maybe more accurately, it got him. We know this because carrying a 100# of oils and spices around is just plain Gospel-crazy.

I'm not sure the Gospel makes sense though facts and philosophy, but I have seen it recently in the way people are helped through the Senior Resource Center, the buying of groceries for a stranger, and elsewhere. Love combined with people and actual earthly stuff is the only way we really glimpse heaven sometimes.

So if you are here thinking this is crazy: Bread that is the body and wine that is the blood of Christ? Forgiveness of sins? Water that combined with God's word somehow brings us new life and wholeness? Loving enemies? Turning cheeks? You are right. It's all pretty nuts. AND totally the truest thing I've ever heard or experienced. And best of all, it's for you. All of it. The oil and ashes and the bread and wine and pies and burritos and - all revealing the glory of God - all revealing heavenly things among earthly things.

Now, that whole resurrection of the dead thing I struggled with years ago in my class, still seems pretty nuts. That the suffering in our bodies - due to injury or illness, paraplegia or physical abuse, aging or self-harm - that the promise of the resurrection of the dead is that somehow God *is* able to knit it all back together like God knit it together in our mother's wombs to begin with. Perhaps we do re-enter our mother's wombs in so far as we return to where God put together limb to limb to begin with. Because this is the God who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

I believe. Help my unbelief.

This is the faith of Nicodemus, maybe like the faith of you and me, and it is in a God who saves us despite what we think we know. Who works despite our disbelief, beyond our best logical arguments, to bring the dead to life, call into existence that which does not yet exist, and to make all things, everywhere, new.

Which is why for a couple millennia, Christians have gathered to say that crazy thing: *we believe in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.* Alleluia. Amen.