

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A. R. Cole
Easter Day (C)
Sunday, April 21, 2019

Acts 10:34-43 | Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:19-26 | John 20:1-18

I think human nature is often revealed in the strangest of places. Car accident reports, for instance, reveal how we all tend to excuse ourselves of blame.

“The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way when it struck my front end.”

There is also often a disarming tendency to explain our own sense of incomprehension at how things have turned out.

“Coming home, I drove into the wrong house and collided with a tree I don’t have.”

There is also that awful uncertainty of indecision when faced with something unpredictable.

“The guy was all over the road; I had to swerve a number of times before I hit him.”

Some of it is just inability to express things clearly in a few words. My favorite though, is the way our experiences are such that we can’t help but introduce facts that are gloriously irrelevant.

“I was thrown from my car as it left the road. I was later found in a ditch by some stray cows.”

Well, how we describe things can be amusing but of course accidents, by in large, are not. It looks pretty clear, at this stage, thank God, that the fire in Notre Dame Cathedral on the 15th was an accident. It would be so much worse were it a deliberate act. But what a tragic loss the world has sustained in the ravaging of this 900-year-old building. It is not the first time it has been ravaged though. The anti-clericalism of the French Revolution did almost as much damage to the interior and that was not restored fully until nearly a hundred years later after the famous 19th century novel by Victor Hugo, “The Hunchback of Notre Dame,” rekindled interest in the building.

The Cathedral is, like all cathedrals, principally a witness to the faith. One of our parishioners described to me how, on Easter Day, the great west doors of Notre Dame, which are closed the whole year, are flung open as the procession leaves at the end of the service, and the normally dark interior is flooded with sunlight. Sadly not this Easter or for some to come. I am also reminded of how the famous poet, playwright, and ambassador to America in the 1920’s, Paul Claudel, an unbeliever in his teenage years, experienced a sudden conversion at the age of eighteen on Christmas Day 1886. It happened as he was listening to a choir sing Vespers in Notre Dame. He said, “In an instant, my heart was touched, and I believed.” He remained an active Christian for the rest of his life, and his writing and plays revolve around the rejection of materialism and the affirmation of the deep spiritual meaning in life. One called “The Satin Slipper” was eleven hours long! So he really meant it!

Yet if Notre Dame is rebuilt and restored to its former grandeur, it will very largely not be due to the fact that it is a symbol of faith. Much of the money that will come, will come because it is a symbol of Paris

and France and because it is a work of great beauty. Now, some will probably say that restoring such a building at such vast cost just because it is beautiful can't be justified. Look at what the money could be spent on.

Yet, I don't think we speak enough about beauty these days. Beauty and faith are far more closely linked than our current age allows. The poet John Keats, ends his famous poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn" with these eternal words that weigh what he thinks beauty says about life :

"When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Yet what is the truth that seeing something beautiful gives us? We can hardly say. We listen to music such as we hear in this place week by week or we stare at a glorious sunrise or at the trees bedecked with blossoms on our Washington streets and we sense something beyond us, something sacred. We cannot grasp what it means. We only know that it is profound and precious and somehow close to the heart of things. Keats had a name for the way that being willing to pursue that mystery, and the truth it intimates, confuses us and leads us to a place where we are uncertain and at a loss. He called it 'negative capability' – like the negative pole in a battery is able to receive the endless flow of electrons in a circuit, never really knowing where they are coming from or what in detail they carry.

When we think of the ruin of something beautiful like Notre Dame it is more personal than we can explain why. Perhaps it is because we see in its ruin our own experience. We look at our lives sometimes and they can look a little like the shell of a burnt-out cathedral or a priceless broken vase.

I am sure we have all known such times, in our own lives and in those of people we know. The bereaved whose lives have been gutted by loss, the great plan that has failed and left someone broken and ruined, the abandoned spouse whose life is left in tatters by a note on the kitchen table, the healthy and vigorous person struck down by sickness or accident like the wounded amputees I met from Afghanistan and Iraq that are left with a life that has been completely empty and changed. These accidents are the burnt-out cathedrals of our lives.

And yet today we celebrate a profound truth. As we look at the Easter garden and the empty tomb, we see something absolutely full of negative capability. Full of the mystery of the beauty of God. In it, we look for the burnt-out cathedrals of our sins and our mistakes and the crushing blows life levels at us, but what we find is a completely different kind of emptiness. For here is an emptiness that has been overcome, and left behind.

Some may choose to stand and puzzle over the tomb's great emptiness, but if they do, they miss the point. Jesus is not there. He is risen. While we stand scratching our heads, he has gone out into all the world to touch and change and make whole the lives of men and women everywhere. How do I know he is risen? I know because I meet him and experience his presence every day, in the daily rhythm of the prayers in the chapel here, in the piercing beauty of the music in our worship, in the humble giving of himself in the bread and wine of the Eucharist, in the drama and suffering and love I see in the lives of the people I serve with and serve. I know he is risen because there is beauty in all of it.

Christ is risen and the empty tomb is the opposite of the burnt-out empty Cathedrals of my life and the world. It is empty not because of loss but because of what has been released.

So what are we to do this glorious Easter morning? We will sing and rejoice and be glad. We will take strength from the bread of his body and drink deeply of the wine of his new life. And we will go out from this place, out in to the world he has gone to win. A world that, despite all indications to the contrary, no longer belongs to the ugliness of the enemy but belongs to the one true King who reveals himself in all that is beautiful and true, the King who has come to take back his throne, man by man, woman by women, heart by heart.