

The Complicity of Silence

Preached at Trinity Episcopal Church, May 28, 2006

“Be like the fox, who makes more tracks than necessary, some in the wrong direction, practice resurrection.” Wendell Berry, *The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front*

Here we are in the 7th Sunday of Easter, when the 40 days of Jesus' resurrection appearances have come to an end and he has withdrawn from the disciples' sight and ascended into heaven. I don't know about you, but I find the story of Jesus' resurrection and ascension a hard story to believe.

But maybe we spend too much time in the Church “believing” in the resurrection or “not believing.” We may lose the point.

When I think about the resurrection now, I not only wonder about what happened to Jesus. I ponder what happened to his disciples. Something happened to them, too. They went into hiding after the crucifixion but after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They became braver and stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was not just

what they saw when they saw Jesus, or how they saw it, but what was set free in them.

What if: If there is some kind of life after death, what if it's not a life exclusively for the dead? What if it's a life available to us all, something the living can participate in, too.

What if the resurrection is not about the appearances of Jesus alone but also about what those appearances point to, what they *ask*. It's finally what we do with them that matters; make them into superstitions or use them as stepping stones to new life. Maybe resurrection, like everything else, needs to be practiced.

What does it mean to practice resurrection on Memorial Day 2006? On this day that honors those soldiers who have died in service to the country, my mind keeps going back to one person.

I met Alan in late March this year in Washington DC. Alan is a Presbyterian minister in Duluth, MN and President of the International Conference of War Veteran Ministers. Alan was part of a writing class I taught in Washington. He

is a gentle, good- looking man in his late fifties or early sixties with sharp eyes that hold more than a trace of irony. He walks with a limp and a cane. He can't walk more than several blocks without pain. Alan served in the navy, and worked in intelligence in Vietnam. For the writing class, he brought two essays he had been working on, and during the week he wrote several short vignettes.

On Sunday afternoon, before the week began, I read one of Alan's essays: I was in teacher-mode: read quickly, get the gist, make a few remarks, figure out how it fits into the over -all point I might be making that day. I was lying on my comfy bed at the Cathedral College anticipating with anxiety and pleasure the week to come. I was not prepared for what I read.

“We came to sing “The Battle Cry of Freedom,” built in our corporate identity in verse after verse of the American experience and dream, sustained by chorus after chorus of “God Bless America.” We arrived ready to enter into that rite of freedom called “war” in this strange, entrancing, beautiful land, knowing that our heritage proclaimed that the song of freedom is purchased with offerings of blood.

And how did we sing our song? How did we celebrate our liturgy?

Cordite, chemical and diesel were the incense lifted up.

‘Patrol’ was our processional, as negotiated towards the place of sacrifice.

Booby traps and land mines were our invocations.

Ambush and engagement our calls to worship.

Explosion and bullet whine our hymns of praise.

Blood was our baptism.

Inedible food seasoned by sweat and fear our communion.

Codes were our scriptures, and our litanies were reports and messages.

And the word of the day was “death given and death received.

Evacuation was our recessional.

And that’s what we found, and that’s how we sang our song in that foreign land.”

Later, in that essay, Alan said one of the most important things I have ever read about the experience of war. He said that once it’s over, when the combatants come back, there is a pact the rest of us keep with soldiers: they don’t tell us what it’s really like to fight a war and we don’t ask. They don’t tell and we don’t ask. Because, simply put, we don’t want to know, and faced with that refusal, they can’t tell us. There is a taboo in place. This taboo makes it possible to continue to wage wars. It is, as a friend said, the complicity of silence.

In his award- winning book *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, Chris Hedges, a war reporter, quotes Farley Moffatt, the Canadian writer:

“I write this book,” Moffatt says, “in the absolute conviction that there has never been, nor ever will be, a good war. Mine was one of the better ones, WWII, as such calamities are measured, but a bloody awful thing it was. So awful that for three decades, I kept its deeper agonies wrapped in the cotton wool of forgetfulness.”

During that week, in Washington, we worked every morning writing, and in the afternoons we were in class together. The other students urged Alan to write a few short pieces about his experience in Vietnam. One day he came up to see me during my “office hours,” and showed me what he’d been working on:

“I woke up at about 4:30 that morning, pulled on my pants and boots, buckled up my 45, grabbed a bottle of bourbon, and went outside to wait for sun-up. It was already hot, a still humid haze hanging on the bay, but it was clear up high, morning light just beginning to lift the darkness. It was going to be a beautiful day in Viet Nam. Pouring out three fingers and taking the first sip of the day, I thought to myself, even said it aloud letting the words challenge the oppressive humidity, “It’s a good day to die.”

When Alan returned from Vietnam to the United States, he said, he felt like a leper: he felt unclean. He had done things that none of us had done, or wanted to hear about and he had to keep them a secret. Drinking helped keep the secrets in their place. He didn’t tell his wife and he didn’t tell his children. And he almost lost his mind.

As Homer says in the Iliad: War consumes everything in its path.

We are at war again, and there are very young men, and some women, killing and dying in Iraq. And those who come home will find that we don't want to hear about what their experience really was and so they won't tell.

When Jesus prays as he does today in the gospel, Father, protect them. Don't take them out of the world, but protect them in it. Sanctify them in truth.

Sanctify them in truth. At least one of the ways I interpret what he says is that if we are asked to live in resurrection in the world, we are asked to be willing to hear and tell the truth.

If I am sanctified in truth, then I don't think I can be part of this, don't ask, don't tell pact with combat veterans anymore. I don't know what that means, exactly; it certainly does not mean phony listening. One of the things I noticed in Washington was that as the week wore on, more and more people went down to see the Vietnam Memorial. Some people made it a point to go with Alan, others went alone. Alan was leading us on an unplanned journey.

At the end of our time in Washington, Alan left us with was the image of the sheltering church. The sheltering church is a place where people come who are seeking to make meaning of their lives , especially people who have been through the kind of organized violence and trauma that Alan and other soldiers

had experienced. The "meaning of life" is something we have to seek and claim for ourselves and the sheltering church is a place where people can bring their share of suffering and joy and wrestle together to find what is meaningful. What counts. Nurses who have seen too much sickness and death and have found that no one wants to hear about it ; any one of us who has seen death, maybe too much of it; those who are or have been terribly ill, or have been raped or anyone who has had to keep too many secrets. And soldiers of every kind. The sheltering church is not a private club for successful citizens, but a place where people can find balm and meaning; where the truth is told and, perhaps more important, where the truth is heard. The sheltering church is a place where, as the old prayer goes, the afflicted are comforted and the joyous are shielded.

As Alan said,

“The sheltering church would not be a place to withdraw from the world, or a place apart from the world; it would not be a sanctuary or retreat.” The sheltering church would be firmly of this world, a place where the human quest for meaning is a holy quest, and the opportunity to undertake that journey together with one another -- and with God -- is God’s greatest gift . “

Something happened to Jesus in the resurrection. And something happened to his disciples, too. They went into hiding after the crucifixion but after the resurrection appearances, they walked back out into the world. They became braver and stronger; they visited strangers, and healed the sick. It was not just what they saw when they saw Jesus, or how they saw it, but what was set free in them.

After I read Alan's story essay I lay on that bed in the Cathedral College and cried. Not only because I had been complicit in the pact of silence we keep with veterans but because out of that, Alan had imagined the sheltering church. He had broken out of death and silence and business as usual, and he had helped me break out, too. Something always comes of breaking out of our old, deathly lives, that is the promise Jesus makes to his disciples and the one he makes to us. I now have a sense of a wider world, one that contains more truth in it, and of that great sheltering church where, with Alan, and all of the rest of you I can learn how to live in resurrection.

On this 7th Sunday in Easter, on this Memorial Day, What is set free in you?

Amen.