

Easter 2, Yr. A, 2014
April 27, 2014
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA
The Rev. Shari Young, preaching

Alleluia, Christ is Risen (The Lord is Risen indeed, Alleluia)

The Atonement is the theological word for the reconciliation of human beings with God through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. When Jesus says, "It is finished" on Good Friday, he seems to be referring to accomplishment of this work.

It is hard to imagine, but in the time of Jesus people who had committed wrongs, as well as those who were especially thankful, would come to the Temple complex in Jerusalem, exchange the money of their country for the coinage of Jerusalem and then purchase animals for sacrifice. Depending on their wealth, they would buy anything from a turtledove, to a goat, to a cow, and have the priest slaughter it on the ritual altar as a "covering" for their sin. It is hard for me as a priest to imagine being covered in blood. The only way this comes into our Eucharist today is "The Blood of Christ, the cup of salvation."

The death of Jesus Christ was the 'once for all' final sacrifice. After his death, and after some time no doubt, the sacrificial system came to an end.

His blood shed on Calvary is also the image of the blood of the Passover lamb spread on the lintels of the doorways of the children of Israel in Egypt to protect them from the Angel of Death as it passed over Egypt eventually killing all the first-born, as the final act of God to convince Pharaoh to set the Israelites free. Jesus death covers all our wrong-doing and sinfulness for all time and sets us free.

St. Paul is the first commentator after Jesus to explain how this works, and if you look up "Atonement" in the Oxford Christian Dictionary, there are 20 or so explanations given by teachers and theologians from the earliest days of Christianity explaining just how the Atonement delivers us from our sin.

While many believers and thinkers have pondered these lofty things, I don't believe that most of us are really interested in how the Atonement works. It is enough to know that if we there are wrongs we have done; and people we have hurt; weighing on our hearts, we can come here and confess them, and the Divine Presence through the priest will absolve us and forgive us and set us free.

Forgiveness is the central doctrine, not the Atonement. It is forgiveness that frees us. It is the Holy One's forgiveness of us, and the exhortation, or commandment really, that we forgive others that is the key to the freedom that defines Christianity.

Underlying all that is the Resurrection. It is the Resurrection that testifies to the power of the Divine Presence over death. Jesus' sacrifice was not the last word, the last word is that nothing can overcome life. Death never has the last word.

The Resurrection is the true mystery. It was the Resurrection that empowered 11 men cowering in the Upper Room; afraid of their own death; to go forth and proclaim with bold, inspired preaching and healings of Jesus. The Resurrection flashed forth in their lives and across history making Christianity the world's largest religion with 2.2 billion followers.

In today's gospel, we hear Thomas saying today "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

Jesus response is "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Nevertheless, something that I can see, that has spoken to me in a powerful way, is the Shroud of Turin, the burial cloth of Jesus.

I don't believe because of the Shroud of Turin, but it is the one thing in the material world that gives evidence of the Resurrection.

In 1980, scientists and photographic specialists were given permission to examine the Shroud which is usually strictly sequestered. Through their tests, they uncovered dozens of bits of evidence which conclusively prove that the Shroud is the burial cloth of Jesus.

To see it in person, it looks like a very faint sepia image of the front and back of an unclothed man in the attitude of death.

The full image was not seen until 1898 when an amateur photographer, Secondo Pia, took a photo of the Shroud during a rare public viewing. In his darkroom as he developed the negative, the image popped forth.

It was not the faint image but rather a lifelike portrait of the man of the Shroud. Pia concluded that the shroud was actually a photographic negative which had been waiting through the centuries for the technology which could unlock its secrets.

Jesus was laid on the lower half of the cloth and then it was brought over his head to cover the front part of his body.

The image shows blood stains on the feet and wrists, on the head, and over the body from the savage beating by flagellation. The marks on the shroud exactly fit the shape of the dumb-bell shaped weights used by the Romans in their first century whips.

There is swelling of the face as from blows to the head, and abrasions on the shoulders as if a heavy beam was carried there. Slightly darker, reddish areas suggest blood as if the man wore a piercing crown or cap of thorns. What is amazing is that the blood flow from these wounds from

the thorns actually make a right angle turn on his cheek as Jesus went from an erect position to a prone one as they took him off the cross and laid him down for burial.

The image also shows the front and side of the body, unlike a painting, because the cloth laid across his front, then draped down the sides of the body.

The information on the shroud was subjected to a density scan of a VP-8 Analyzer using technology to translate image intensity of the moon and Mars into vertical relief. They found that the shroud contains a 3 dimensional "code." They were able to construct a life-like 3D relief of the body on the shroud. At first they were confused by bulges appearing on the eyes, but then learned through history books of the burial custom of the day of placing coins on the eyes of the deceased. When they analyzed the coin they discovered the image of Caesar; it was coin of the day.

Dust samples had been collected from the shroud and analyzed by a criminologist. It revealed among other things, 48 samples of pollen. He traced most of them to locations in France and Italy where the shroud had been shown publically, but 7 samples were from plants grown exclusively in the areas around the Dead Sea and others indigenous only to Palestine.

The cloth of the shroud was similarly analyzed and found to be of linen, woven by hand and amazingly the image is create by blood deposited not only on the surface of the cloth but penetrating into it at varying densities.

If one accepts that this is the burial cloth, the question is of course, how was the Resurrection accomplished. As the image shows no indication of being painted but rather resembles a scorch, there have been no definitive answers to how the Resurrection took place. Some scientists envision a split second burst of high intensity radiation from within the folded halves of the shroud. This speaks to me.

There is much more information contained in the shroud but the point is not, as Jesus pointed out to Thomas, whether the Resurreciton is scientifically verifiable, the point is what it means to us.

Despite our logo, the cross; the man on the cross, that instrument of torture, our religion is not about Good Friday. It is not about the suffering of the Passion. It is not about the blood. Our religion is about life; about new life, about new possibilities, about new hope, about victory over the impossibly dark. Christianity is a religion for the darkest hour; a religion for a time when all is lost. It is not a religion that shies away from suffering, or promises a quick fix, but this Christianity of Jesus Christ guarantees that God is always with us even when we might feel God is farthest away.

Easter tells us that in the end, life wins. Death is overcome.
Light always overcomes the dark.

