

Homily for 2<sup>nd</sup> Easter (B), St. Ignatius Church, April 19, 2009.  
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Ten years ago after I gave an Easter homily from this pulpit, a woman called me the next day and said, “Can you help me to believe what you said? I want to, because I have a terminal illness, and I will die sometime this year.” I was with her many times in the following year before she found the truth of resurrection in person. We all need a stronger resurrection faith. We hate to die—of course, because we love life, and each other. It is God’s first gift to us. How can we be sure that life continues, that death is not destruction?

The first answer, an overwhelming one, is what happened to Jesus. Read and ponder all the gospel accounts of the various encounters with him in the risen life. **Encounter** is the right word—an encounter can change one; it is a much stronger word than “appearance” or “meeting.” Review them briefly. The risen Christ appeared first to Mary Magdalen in a garden by the empty tomb. All you heard last week was about the empty tomb. We believe in something more: a real presence. It is still real—it can fill our own emptiness, our sense of loss. Next is that wonderful gospel, worth memorizing, of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. It mirrors so much of our own life—going somewhere, unaware he is with us, and finally coming to know him, as we do today, in the breaking of the bread. The risen Christ appeared to Paul, in a vision that changed his life. And twice Jesus appeared to Peter. Paul tells us something astonishing: that Jesus appeared at one time to more than 500 of his followers. Indeed scholars tell us that these encounters with the risen Christ happen at intervals for at least a year. In all of this, two facts are important. First, he is changed. He does not have the same kind of body. Secondly, despite this astonishing change they are able to recognize him. Not at first—he has to deny that he is a ghost, and even ask for something to eat! They come to believe he is real. A real presence. One that assures them of forgiveness, and gives them work to do. No, he does not stay around forever; he is exalted to heaven. But he is still a real presence to us—through word and sacrament and people who love.

The gospels stand up well as historical documents. The most remarkable proof of their veracity is the church itself, two thousand years of Christianity built upon the astounding fact that God raised his son from the dead. None of the church councils ever debated the resurrection. The belief was there from the beginning, otherwise we would not be here today.

There are arguments from reason as well as the scriptures to help us believe that life is not destroyed by death. The first is philosophical and appealed to the French philosopher Descartes. It says that in the history of humanity we have already passed the great transition from non-being to being. Once there was nothing, then something, then someone. Persons, with names—like you and me. Transition from non-being to being is much greater than a change in the mode of being. If the Creator has accomplished the first—and here we are—we may with confidence expect the lesser exercise of God’s love and power.

Another argument is from the unfinished business of ourselves. Or thirst for meaning—of all kinds. For truth, reality. We never have enough time to take it all in. Of course not—that’s for eternity. No wonder theologians speak of God as ultimate reality, mediated by being.

Still another argument comes from the unfairness of life. Life is unfair. If God is good, he owes us!

The greatest of all arguments for resurrection is the experience of love. To love someone, the poet said, is to say that thou, at least thou, shall not die. In a great novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoevsky, a woman comes to a holy monk, Father Zossima, and says she believes in everything but resurrection and she is terrified by thought that it may not be true. “Prove it to me,” she begs, and he said in answer, “That is not possible but you may be sure of it. “Then how, how.” He answered, “By the experience of unconditional love. Thus the holy man. I assure you, this is not just some pious theory. The greatest philosopher, many think, of the twentieth century, a superb analyst of how we use language, was Wittgenstein. He wrote profoundly of how we use words and speak of truth. He said on one occasion, “One must use poetry in theology.” And also, “Only love can understand the resurrection.” Love is that part of God in us that never dies. Then poetry, yes, the language of metaphor embraces more of reality—of God.

And so the challenge—can you keep this resurrection faith in the face of death all around us, every day. Go back to what they tell us of Jesus, the Risen One, and his presence in our lives. I put my thoughts in Jesus in this poem, after the agonizing death of an eighteen-year-old girl I knew, and then another, a boy of sixteen we all loved.

Jesus grew older,  
he never grew old.  
He died young.  
He rose young.  
A melody in the night  
still sung.  
A tale in the evening  
still told.

O beautiful One,  
undying One!  
Finish in joy  
what love has begun.  
Lead us beyond the trying,  
the living, the dying.  
Make us new again.  
And young.  
Forever young.