

Lent 5  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

April 6, 2014  
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## The Way of the Cross

“Your brother will rise again,” said, Jesus.

“I know that he will rise on the last day,” replies Martha, ever the practical, rooted theologian.

“I am resurrection, and I am life,” returns Jesus.

The Cross is the doorway to heaven. If it so at the end of life, in the timeless heart of God it is true now as well.

Books about near-death experiences are very popular these days. There are many. We have one in our Book Corner called Heaven is SO Real! Other popular titles are Heaven is For Real, Seven Minutes in Heaven; the list goes on. Skeptics claim that you can duplicate exactly the same experiences for people using brain probes and medication. However, they cannot explain information that some of these people come back with that they had no way of knowing. They cannot duplicate experiences of floating above one's body and seeing over the walls to other rooms, etc. Whatever you think of them, you have to admit that they portray a different view of heaven than we normally think of. Heaven is not merely a land in the clouds to which good people (or Christians, or our in-group) go when we die, it's an alternate reality that is present now. In fact, every one of them would say it's not merely an alternate reality, it is THE reality, of which this life is a shadow. This is the dream, they would say, and that is the waking life.

The good news is, you don't have to barely survive a life-threatening event to touch that reality. We have all touched it. We have all been in situations where the veil is pulled back and we see things for what they really are. I'm not talking about moments when you realize someone has pulled the wool over your eyes, or someone you loved is not quite the person you thought they were, or a situation proves to be less than what it was billed to be. I'm talking about those moments when for a moment you are taken beyond yourself.

One such moment happened to me when I was in High School. I was up in the mountains with my friends. I was sitting on the side of a hill, watching the sunset. In front of me was Mount Antizana, rising to almost 19,000 feet with its four summits around the central crater. We were lying on alpine grass at about 13 and a half thousand.

With 400 inches of rain a year, a clear evening was a rarity, but we had one. The sun shone on the mountain as it set and set the ice and snow ablaze. It looked like there was a giant light bulb inside the mountain shining out. The moment was so beautiful, so rare and so exalted that none of us spoke—we hardly dared breathe lest we break the magic of the moment.

For those brief moments, and I have no idea how long it lasted, I was not aware of "me" in the normal sense. Oh, I was present, but so were my friends, and so was the mountain, and the grass, and the birds, and the few clouds that clung to the sky. We were all part of a big picture, whose painter was the sun and whose subject was the mountain, and whose author was God. It was all suddenly more than what it seemed to be—it was real, it was true, and it was beautiful.

In our class on Tuesday afternoons we talked about these moments that Gerald May called Unitive Experiences. At first people weren't sure they had ever had one, yet as we talked each one was able to offer at least one such experience. Dr. May, teacher, psychiatrist and co-founder of the Shalem Institute for Spiritual Formation, and author of our book, claims that every person he ever interviewed has had one. I believe him—I believe these moments are gifts of God to every human being on the face of the earth, and by and through them we get a glimpse of heaven.

Why, then, was it hard for these people to remember one in our class? Here is where the Cross becomes the doorway to heaven. One of the central aspects of these experiences is that the ego is no longer in control. We are aware of ourselves (or not,) but we are NOT in the center of the picture. We are one actor on the stage, one stroke of the brush in a whole painting, and it is the whole that is so compelling. That is why we feel "taken out of ourselves," "moved beyond ourselves," "forgetful of ourselves," all those ways we try to describe the loss, for a moment, of the control of the ego. Of course, the ego is addicted to being in control, so on one level these beautiful windows into truth are scary. They threaten us. Many of us intentionally or subconsciously deny, suppress and forget them. As T. S. Eliot said, "humankind cannot bear very much reality." (The Four Quartets.) But they are there, nonetheless. And they are what they are, windows into heaven.

Notice, then, what the ego experiences as we move into one of these special moments. The ego loses control. The ego lives for control and it loses it. When you lose what you live for what is there left? It feels like death. Paul calls what we call the ego, the flesh. In the Epistle lesson today Paul reminds us that we do not live according to the flesh (the rule of the ego,) but the Spirit, the presence of God within that knows and appreciates these moments of clarity and vision.

And notice as well what happens with the soul? These experiences are overwhelmingly compelling, they are powerfully beautiful, they are true beyond the word true. They are LIFE as we do not know it normally. Ezekiel's vision of dry bones describes the ego dethroned, yet the work of the prophet is to call upon the Lord for resurrection, and to create out of death a great army of the people of God.

So the death of the rule of the ego results in a resurrection to life abundant. Death and Resurrection, the central symbol of our Christian faith is Christ, dying and rising again. He is the one who blazes this trail for us, his death and resurrection show us the way through our own egos to life in the Spirit, from earth to heaven.

Jesus tells Martha, "I am resurrection, and I am life." He who believes in me (surrenders the rule of the ego) will never die (will know life abundant.) Local tradition said that the spirit of a dead person hovered over the body for 3 days, hoping to re-enter it. After the 3rd day there was no hope of resuscitation. The corruption of decay would have sealed the death as permanent. So Jesus raises Lazarus to life on the 4th day! This is not merely the restoration of life, it is the vindication of life over death. It is life as Martha has never seen, abundance inconceivable and beautiful.

We are a people of the Cross. Death leads to life abundant. Surrender, then, the rule of the ego, the power of the flesh. Quietly discipline yourself to recognize those gifts of glimpses into heaven, and trust that such surrender will always yield to life abundant. As you cross yourself this Lent, remember that just as it is by the death and resurrection of Christ that we will one day be in heaven, so it is only by death of pride and resurrection to love that the windows of heaven are opened to us now. We walk the way of the Cross, that we might live the joy of resurrection.