

FLESH AND BLOOD
Sermon for Easter 3B:Lk 24:36b-48
LPC, 4/26/09

As I prepared this sermon my head was full of this book: *The Shack* by William P. Young. I read it for the first time several months ago and again just last week for a book club discussion.

The book tells the story of a man struggling with his faith in the aftermath of a stupendous family tragedy. In the course of the story, the man confronts the Trinitarian God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) as well as his own past and his own anger.

Being both seminary-trained and skeptical of popular tracts, I read this book with sensors on high alert for heresy or squishy theology. In two readings I've found nothing to fault in that aspect of the book. And although I might wish the book were more artfully written, there are many things I like a lot about it.

I like that the book describes a man in a difficult position for whom platitudes and creedal statements are inadequate. This man's problems are real and horrendous. He needs a faith that will fit his real-life, flesh-and-blood situation. This is not a faith that fits on a bumper sticker.

In that, he represents you and me. The average Christian can accept what he or she is told about religion and be quite happy with it. But crisis puts a strain on human faith. For many people, what is swallowed cheerfully in the Sunday School classroom is found to be woefully (and I do mean woe-fully) inadequate to flesh and blood reality.

Now, Christianity is supposed to be a flesh and blood faith. We believe that God Godself became flesh and blood in the person of Jesus Christ, experiencing all the joys and sorrows a person can experience. We believe that God, in the form of Jesus Christ, bled and suffered and actually died a human death. What could be more flesh-and-blood than that? But we also believe that Jesus rose from the dead, lived after dying, and lives even now. This supernatural event, Christ rising from the dead, has the potential to transform everything that is natural, everything that is flesh-and-blood, in our lives.

This message comes across in today's reading from Luke. What we have here is another account of a resurrection appearance. In fact, this seems to be Luke's version of the same story we heard last week from the Gospel of John. Jesus is appearing to his followers after his death. For most of them this is the first time they have seen Jesus since they saw him cold dead. And here he is alive and kicking.

Luke goes to some trouble to emphasize that Jesus is flesh and blood. The disciples are not seeing a ghost. Jesus draws their attention to his skin and muscle and bone and the blood that has stained his flesh. He eats a piece of fish.

Jesus is real. He is human. He is flesh-and-blood. This is important.

This story tells us that our faith, which is based on this flesh and blood Jesus, is also flesh and blood. Our faith is not airy-fairy, pie-in-the-sky, theoretical stuff. It is more than words, it is more than ideals, it is more than theology. It is visceral, down-to-earth, blood-sweat-and-tears reality.

Flesh-and-blood faith means a flesh-and-blood ethic. In other words, Christian belief in a flesh-and-blood Jesus and a flesh-and-blood faith has everything to do with how Christians act. The Christian faith, if it is Christian faith, is acted out in flesh-and-blood ways. We don't just talk and think about how nice forgiveness is, we forgive. We don't just meditate on healing, we heal. We don't just conceptualize food, we feed the flesh-and-blood people Jesus loves. We don't just theorize about love, we love.

One of the things I like about *The Shack* is that it tells the story of a man coming to grips with a flesh-and-blood faith. This is a faith that is going to grab his guts. The rewards of this faith are beyond his wildest dreams, but to get there he has to dive deep into his own very flesh. He has to forgive what most of us would call unforgiveable.

I was fascinated to find out that while the main character in *The Shack* is eventually able to forgive, the book's author, William P. Young says he is not yet able to forgive his own abusive father. This is not, to me, an example of hypocrisy. What it suggests is that Young has a vision of his faith becoming flesh and blood in a way that he himself cannot yet realize. Yet the fact that he wrote about forgiveness of parental abuse says that he continues to hold to this ideal until he is able to realize it in his own flesh and blood. That, to me, is the essence of faith.

Flesh and blood faith is, often, costly faith. A flesh and blood ethic is, often, a costly ethic. Easter does not promise that our faith and ethics will cost us nothing. What Easter promises is that Jesus will win, indeed has won. If you need inspiration in your flesh and blood struggles, know this. We may have to wait for it, but what we believe in our hearts about love conquering all will become flesh and blood reality. The more open we are to the redemptive work of Christ, the more we will see it. The more actively we cooperate in the redemptive work of Christ, the sooner we will see it, in ourselves and in the world.

The main character in *The Shack* is a kindred spirit to Job, whose story is told in the Old Testament. Job's friends offered platitudes as his flesh wasted and his blood flowed, and Job was not satisfied. Job needed a flesh-and-blood faith, and eventually he found it. As Job said, "I know that my redeemer lives, and in my flesh shall I see God."

Ours is a flesh-and-blood faith.