

WHAT'S NEW?

Sermon for Easter 5C—Rev. 21:1-6, Jn 13:31-35

LPC, 4/28/13

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," *The Four Quartets*

I was switching channels the other night and saw that *The Wizard of Oz* was showing on Turner Classic Movies, in a version which had been recently restored by archivists. Like most of my generation I grew up watching this movie once every year on television. I know the script by heart from countless previous viewings, so I wasn't going to watch it again, but I got involved, again, in spite of myself. And I have to say that the newly restored color was absolutely gorgeous, and actually brought something new to my experience of this classic picture.

Why watch a movie multiple times? Or reread a favorite book? Or revisit a place you've already been? There are several reasons.

A person may want to recapture the good feelings experienced in previous viewings, readings or visits. This may or may not be successful, because you're never exactly the same person from year to year. People change; circumstances change, and the feelings may not be recapturable.

Another reason would be to experience the comfort of familiarity. Familiarity does not always breed contempt. Sometimes it feels like home. Ask Dorothy.

But a third reason is to discover, amidst the familiarity, something you've never noticed before, the way I experienced the brilliant color of my last viewing of *The Wizard of Oz*. Or the way you can read the same passage of the Bible every two or three years as it comes up in the Lectionary, and find something new.

In today's excerpt from the very end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, the author John describes the culmination of God's ultimate plan, where Christ assumes his rightful place at the center of the universe and is symbolically married to God's perfected creation symbolized by the "new Jerusalem." Everything else is finally put in subjection to Christ, and all is literally set right with the world.

See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

As often as I have read those words, I never fail to be thrilled by them. They are always new to me. I need to hear them anew, often, because there are always new tears. There is always another new death. There is always new evidence of the depravity of human beings to depress and discourage. God sometimes seems so distant. So I turn again and again to this vision of humanity's ultimate future, and of God's promise of abiding presence and intimate love.

As long as there are new tears, new death, new depravity, the need for God's abiding presence and intimate love will be new. You could, however, argue that there's nothing new about a presence and a love that has, in one way or another, been with humanity from the very beginning.

In Revelation, Christ says, "See, I am making all things new," but what is really new? God has dwelt with mortals from the beginning.

In today's Gospel reading from John, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another," but how is that really new? "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy mind and all thy strength and thy neighbor as thyself" has been the foundation of Jewish law from the beginning. What is really new?

In the aftermath of Jesus' life and death and rising to life again, there *is* something new. What's new is that Jesus has redefined love.

The Son was, and is, fully God, but the Son set aside his divinity to dwell with human beings, and experience everything human beings experience, even pain and death, in order to sanctify everything human beings experience, even pain and death. The Son sacrificed his divinity for love of people. Jesus gave of himself repeatedly during his earthly ministry, healing and feeding people, for love. Finally Jesus gave himself up to die for his beloved humanity. Christian theology is clear about this. Jesus was not overcome by the forces that were out to get him. Jesus delivered himself voluntarily into their hands. His life was not taken from him. He gave it.

What is new about Jesus' love is this: self-sacrifice and self-giving. Love is not just willing another's good any more. Love is newly defined in Jesus as self-giving.

When Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another," he means exactly what he says. He means love each other the Jesus way. The Jesus way is not just treating other people the way you would like to be treated. The Jesus way is giving of yourself.

Here's what's new: Jesus is saying, "I give you a new commandment, that you give of yourself to one another. Just as I have given of myself to you, you also should give of yourselves to one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you give of yourselves to one another."

All you have to do is look around to see that if humans started giving of themselves to one another, it would be something new.

Fortunately, there is an Archivist at work to continually restore our color and repair the fabric of our film. God's work of renewal is continuous and faithful. And so we come every week to this rail, to do something we've done countless times before, but, each time, to be made new.