

God doesn't want nice people; he wants new people.

Luke 24:36b-48

A Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter

The Gospel text for today is another text about an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. In order to get at what it's about I'd like to go through the Nicene Creed with you. The Nicene Creed is the most widely held creed in Christendom, and of course, it is about the resurrection.

The Creed starts by saying: God is the Creator. He made everything, seen and unseen, out of nothing. That, of course, excludes Hinduism and Buddhism, which do not hold to a creator.

Then in the second article, it says: This God became truly a human being and died and rose again for us. That, of course, excludes Judaism and Islam, even though that is not explicitly said.

The Nicene Creed's second article concludes by saying: "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." That's speaking to religions of that time and now, which say it's all part of the cycle of nature. It is all a kind of overall fate. The Nicene Creed says: No, he is the one who brings it to an end, he judges the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. This speaks directly to the Epicureans of that day, and the Epicureans of today are those who say: "When you're dead, you're dead, and there's nothing more after that."

Then we come to the third article of the Nicene Creed about the Holy Spirit, about God still being present among us. You recall it says: "one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins" and "one holy Christian (catholic) and apostolic Church." That excludes individualistic Christianity. To be a Christian is necessarily to be with other Christians. As Matt 18:20 states: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them." That's how it works, in the preaching of Christ and his sacraments; the Creed mentions Baptism. That's how he works now. That's how it happens.

And the final line of the Creed says: "We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come." And that excludes those who say that evil and death are just an illusion. This excludes Hinduism, Buddhism, Christian Science, and all such beliefs.

"And the life of the world to come" also excludes those who say after death it's annihilation and also those who say: "Who knows, perhaps a beautiful isle somewhere." No, it's life as he makes it for us with him.

90% of the Christian at the time of the Nicene Creed affirmed the Creed. And the 10% who didn't, we know today by a different name, Jehovah's Witnesses. Otherwise, this is a creed

of worldwide Christendom. Most Christians throughout the 1700 years since the Creed was first formulated affirm this.

I often wonder when we use the Creed in our worship services what we are thinking. It's one of those things you do in church. We do it by rote, and some people probably think: "God, I'll say nice things about you, and then you'll say nice things about me." It's sort of playing games with God. We also fall into thinking this is a kind of catechism, which it isn't, a summary of truths, which it isn't, although it has truths in it.

What we doing is we are confessing the Creed. This means we stake our lives on this. This is what makes all the difference. That's what it means, and you may say, "Well, I will at least have my mental fingers crossed." But that's what 90% of Christians hold.

What is indicated by the way we just went through it, is that because it's specific, it excludes a lot of things. It doesn't have to be said, but it automatically excludes other beliefs. And you and I know that this is not the creed and confession of the modern secular Western world in Europe, the US, and Canada, New Zealand, and Australia today.

The creed of modern Western culture, which has drifted away from its Judeo-Christian roots, is far different, and it summed up by saying: "God is nice, we are nice, isn't that nice?" That's the common religion of our day, the common creed, and of course the point of that "religion" is to be as tolerant and as nice as you can be. That's what its about.

C.S. Lewis in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, sums it up by saying: "God does not want nice people; he wants new people." That's what the resurrection is about.

Let's come to this text at the end of Luke, which says (paraphrase): "He suddenly appeared among them" (Luke 24:36). You recall last week in John 20:19 in the text about Doubting Thomas, that in the room where the disciples were together, the doors were locked for fear of the Jews. You can be sure again in Luke 24 that they were behind locked doors. The first thing is: He went right through the walls and locked door. Hummm, it may seem like Star Trek: Beam me up Scotty, and all that.

It goes on to say they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he ate it. In Zombie movies that happens all the time. Did he require food? Did he chew it and swallow it?

Again, to come back to C.S. Lewis, this time to his best-known book, *Screwtape Letters*, as you may know, the book is a collection of letters between a senior devil and a junior devil. In one letter the senior devil says: Don't bother tempting people to murder, robbing banks, sexual sins, or arguing whether God exists or not. Just distract them with trivial things. Just divert them, just get them off the track. Amuse them. If you can just amuse and distract them, they will be hooked. Will I still have blue eyes in heaven? Will my dog go to heaven? Get them off track.

What is Easter about? Bunnies, chicks, lilies, tulips, and chocolates? All of these things are part of the world of nature and nice, but they are also a side-track, a diversion. It's similar to Doubting Thomas wanting a personal miracle. As you recall, that's simply not what the text is about, not what the Gospel of John is about. We are under constant pressure to go along with making Easter a cultural celebration of springtime bunnies and flowers, distracting us from what really matters.

What is it about? It is something that explodes all our ways of thinking. When Jesus suddenly stood among them, Luke 24:41 says they were at first startled and frightened and disbelieved for joy. What in the world?! What had just happened? How can we talk about this? This is more than any of our ways of thinking because death is conquered. The One who created everything out of nothing has now done something even more, that is, conquered death. It's not an illusion. Not a trick. No, he's conquered it, and everything has changed.

Ephesians 3:20 (KJV) piles on superlatives to say what this means: "now to him who is able to do **exceedingly abundantly above** all that we ask or think." It blows your mind. I like lilies. I like tulips, but that's not what it's about. This is something that is beyond all of our thinking because we are caught in our problems of sin and death. And that's all over. That's why it says: They "disbelieved for joy" (Luke 24:41).

As Paul writes in 1 Cor 2:9: "No eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him." In other words, it's gloriously beyond all those things that we allow to sidetrack us.

Like the Nicene Creed, Acts 4:12 states: "There is no other name under heaven by which we can be saved." It says that because all of those others are excluded, and only here is death conquered in him, and that is the Gospel, the Christian faith, that he died and rose again for you and me, and everything is new. Amen