False Crosses

September 17, 2006 (Proper 19, Year B)

Isaiah 50:4-9a | Psalm 116:1-8 | James 3:1-12 | Mark 8:27-38

On Tuesday, I was up at five in the morning, watching NASA TV on-line[1]. The space shuttle *Atlantis* had arrived at the International Space Station a few days before, carrying a special payload, a 35,000 pound cocoon carrying two "solar wings" and their supporting structure. A few days before, they had attached this massive, hexagonal cocoon to the space station. Then, early on Tuesday morning, I witnessed an extraordinary sight: the solar wings unfurling, rolling out from a tight little cylinder into two hundred feet of golden panels, catching the light like the wings of angels.

I was entranced by the beauty of the moment, and awestruck by the years of planning and engineering and hoping and finger-crossing that went into this one perfect morning 250 miles above the earth. A room full of engineers in Houston, holding their breath that moment, tense with expectation.

For Peter and the other disciples, walking with Jesus on the way to the villages of Caesarea Philippi, the anticipation might have been similar. They have been witnesses to miracles, healing, teaching, great love… Their hearts have been telling them for days now that there is something wonderful and special about this rabbi. And in the early morning in the hills of what is now Syria, Jesus finally asks the question they have been asking themselves: "Who do you say I am?"

A miraculous unfolding of light, the recognition that this was God's anointed, the Christ, there among them.

But instead of a lovely unfolding of glory, of angels wings and victory, Jesus begins talking about being rejected by the very people waiting for God's word. Instead of preaching victory, he began preaching defeat. Instead of preaching power, he began to talk about his death.

Like I said a couple weeks ago, Jesus wasn't very good at church growth strategies. Peter recognizes right away that this kind of talk is going to drive away some of the disciples. "Don't say these kind of things! Your frightening and confusing people."

It's hard to fault Peter for his reaction – and his shock, I'm sure, at Jesus harsh, insulting reply. We've been struggling with the meaning of the crucifixion for a couple of millennia now.

Thursday was Holy Cross Day, the celebration of Empress Helena's discovery of the cross that Christ was crucified upon. Helena also built the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, on the site of Christ's tomb – it is one of the most powerful and moving ancient churches in the world. From that day in the 5th century forward, pieces of wood of the true cross have made their ways into reliquaries. John Calvin supposed that it would take 300 people, not 1, to carry all the wood claiming to be part of the true cross; someone bitingly proposed building the British Navy from the wood of the true cross, since it was obviously able to multiply itself miraculously.

It is possible that there are false reliquaries out there. There certainly are false crosses. These false crosses hang in our own. We are pressured to take our suffering, shrug, and explain that "it's just my cross to bear." It is a theology that has been applied especially to women and victims of abuse; a theology that has been used to justify slavery and ignore poverty. "Suffer in silence; it is your cross to bear."

But suffering, in and of itself, is not the *summum bonum*, it is not the high good that God wants for us. "I have set before you life and death," God tells the recently freed slaves escaping from Egypt, "I have set before you

[1] http://www.nasa.gov

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life and death…choose life." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Look again at what Jesus taught that morning, outside of Caesarea Philippi. He didn't only teach about the crucifixion. He also taught about the resurrection, about new life and the coming of the kingdom, the justice, the loving reign of God on this earth. Take up your cross and follow me, he asks us, and the journey we are invited on is a journey to life -- not to death, but to life. You need both your hands to carry this journey with me, he teaches us. Set everything else down, everything that ties you to fear – set down pride, set down wealth, set down anxiety, set down loathing – set everything down, pick up your cross and follow me.

Which brings me back, in a strange way, to the International Space Station, glinting in the light of 16 sunsets and 16 sunrises a day. In its vaguely cruciform shape, it is a (shockingly expensive) glyph for what the cross is to Christianity. The point of the international space station isn't the space station – it's everything that goes around below and above and with it, it is about the journey there, and perhaps the journey beyond.

The point, the goal, the good, of the cross isn't the cross itself. It is the willingness to surrender everything – pride, wealth, even life, in order to remain true to God's justice, God's love. The point of the cross isn't the cross itself. The point of the cross is the resurrection that lies beyond.

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