

SERMON- Easter 3 (C)

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Acts 9:1-20)

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-19

St. Timothy's, Herndon

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Psalms 30

OPENING:

One of my church pet peeves is when a group is gathered for an event, say in the parish hall, but no one can get the crowd's attention and so someone, oftentimes a priest, will yell amid the noise:

"The Lord be with you"

and everyone will, almost robotically, reply: "And also with you."

And we all have a good laugh.

Today, is May the Fourth, which has become "Star Wars Day" when people say "May the Force be with you."

The joke being that in *Star Wars*, characters often say "May the Force be with you"—a straight rip-off of our "The Lord be with you,"

Every year, the day gets a little bit more popular, maybe one day it will also be a pet peeve. But not yet.

Last week, we heard Jesus greet Thomas and the disciples with a similar greeting: "Peace be with you" he said in the locked upper room.

Today, Jesus makes another, oh-so cinematic, appearance to the disciples and he says, this time..... "Come have breakfast."

It does not have the same movie tagline quality, but it's an important sentence.

FORCE and SPIRIT:

This morning, since it's Star Wars Day, and it falls on a Sunday, I am going to talk about the Force, about Resurrection, and about breakfast.

Now, it's always dangerous to preach on an element of pop culture.

Some people, like my wife, have never seen a minute of content from a franchise that spans 50 years and 11 movies and billions of dollars. But here goes.

The good news for the uninitiated: Star Wars is not that complex or particularly deep. There is this thing called "The Force" which is kind of (emphasis on "kind of") like the Holy Spirit, it's a metaphysical, spiritual force that connects and binds the universe and can be used by those who understand it.

(I have just, by the way, saved you decades of Youth Group and Weekend Retreats with those few sentences.)

Themes of sacrifice and redemption, do run through *Star Wars*, there is even a Virgin Birth and Luke and Han do get trapped in the belly of a whale, well trash bin, that almost swallows them up but then spits them out, changed and transformed.

“May the Force be with you!” Indeed.

George Lucas, the creator of *Star Wars*, once described himself as a ‘Buddhist Methodist’, and famously took many of his movie ideas from the work of Joseph Campbell, author and professor of comparative religion and mythology.¹

I am here, though, to rain on their parade a little bit, to say that there are some things about life that *Star Wars* gets spectacularly wrong, at least when viewed from Christian lens.

I want to lovingly poke some holes in those, using our Gospel as an example.

BBQ on the BEACH:

In the Gospels, Jesus dies, dead as any human being ever died. His heart stops beating, his blood stops pumping, his brain ceases to function. The crucifixion makes sure of that, his body gets put into a tomb, and it lies there.

In *Star Wars*, Obi Wan Kenobi gets slain (spoiler alert!) by Darth Vader and..... he vanishes. His clothes fall to the floor, and poof....

In the Gospels, Jesus is resurrected. The tomb is discovered empty, then Jesus appears, like in our story, and he is alive, but not quite the same, changed but similar. He has wounds and marks. but his closest friends don’t quite recognize him. And Jesus says: “Come have breakfast.” Ghosts don’t eat, but Jesus does, continually in the resurrection appearances, because apparently that was important.

In *Star Wars*, Obi Wan Kenobi dies and.... some part of him becomes a part of his Force. His ghost, his soul, his life... spirit? No blood on the floor, no wounds in his side, no BBQ on the Beach.

I am belaboring this point, to restate perhaps the obvious, as Christians we believe in Jesus’ bodily resurrection, we believe in an empty tomb and that Jesus was

¹ Taylor, Chris. *How Star Wars Conquered the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of a Multibillion Dollar Franchise*. New York: Basic, 2015, 60.

resurrected and then ascended into heaven.²

I am belaboring the point because I worry sometimes, that story-telling as powerful and as beautiful as Star Wars seeps into our cultural understanding and becomes the common definitions around these important matters of life and death.

GNOSTICISM:

No reason to blame Lucas or Star Wars, those ideas are a lot older, and they go all the way back to Jesus' time.

Those who believed those sorts of things back then were called "Gnostics" from the Greek for "knowledge" (think "Cognition" or "Diagnosis") and they believed that the soul was trapped in the body in this world. The goal was to escape through some process, such that your soul could leave this material world for a better one.

The writers of the New Testament, the early church fought against that theological understanding, they wrote the Gospels and proclaimed a Christ crucified in opposition to that. But I fear that if you asked your average Christian (not those being taking confirmation here!) that what they would say about life/death/ God is that the goal is we are trying to leave our earthly bodies, that we want to go to heaven when we die, leave our corpses behind and join with a Life Force.

That's a perfectly good metaphysic, a perfect good belief system, it's just not Christianity. It's Gnosticism, it's Descartes, or it's faux Hollywood "Eastern Religion" with a sprinkling of Biblical themes.

EASTER:

So what? You might ask.

So... everything... I might answer.

At a funeral once, an Episcopal clergy person said to the grieving mother of a teenager, dead of leukemia, to not worry, that the body before her was "just a shell" of her daughter's self. He promptly received a swift slap from the mother who said "I'll tell you when it's 'just a shell,' ... From now and until I tell you otherwise, she's my daughter."³

² In other words, there is no part of the Apostles' Creed which, in our present opinion, expresses the whole genius of the Christian faith more nearly than just the despised phrase: 'I believe in the resurrection of the body.'" ~ Reinhold Niebuhr (Long, 43)

³ Long, Thomas G. 2009. *Accompany Them with Singing: The Christian Funeral*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 35.

“Early Christianity inherited the treasure of the Jewish understanding of the body and intensified it with strong convictions about the incarnation and the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Doing so stirred Christians not to idealize bodies (as the Greeks did in their perfect sculptures) or to romanticize them (as Sports Illustrated does in its swimsuit edition) but to care for bodies, real bodies, both living and dead, in ways that perplexed and confused their pagan neighbors.

The world mattered, bodies mattered. The world and bodies mattered to the Christian community because they clearly mattered to God, who loved the world so much that the divine became flesh and dwelled among us.”

The culture did not understand it so it accused Christians of cannibalism, and ridiculed the care for the dead, and for the poor, and for the sick, that we practiced.”⁴

The Romans did not care that much about the Gnostics, talking about a Spirit in the Sky.

The Jews, they worried about; Christians, they worried about.

Jesus, and God the Father, the God of Israel, have an almost comic interest in our earthliness, in our bodies, Jesus shows up and asks:

“Whatcha you doing?”

Why?

Jesus is bread of heaven that saves us all.

Augustine: Jesus is cooked fish who was crucified and buried.⁵

We are coming up on Pentecost where indeed the Holy Spirit is depicted as wind, as this ethereal spirit, but also as fire.

We live between the two fires of Peter’s denial in the Passion and this great breakfast feast by the Beach

Resurrection is for the living.

“May the Lord be with you.”

AMEN

⁴ Long, 29

⁵ Brown, Raymond E. 1970. *The Gospel According to John (XIII–XXI): Introduction, Translation, and Notes* (Anchor Bible Commentary Series). New Haven: Yale Bible. 1099