



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, July 26, 2009
The Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Choral Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin
on
Mark 6:45-52

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THE TOTALLY UNEXPECTED

Mark tells us it was their hearts that were hard, that that's why they didn't understand about the loaves, that that's why they were utterly astounded by Jesus appearing to them as God, walking past them on the water in a parade of his divinity, then entering the boat and bringing the wind to cease. Their hearts were hard, Mark says. It doesn't seem a good thing to have a hard heart, does it? Elsewhere, we may recall Jesus telling the people that the law given by Moses had certain exceptions built into it because their ancestors had hard hearts. Because the law had to be applied to people who had hard hearts, they were kept from having as good a law as they might have had. We may also recall that Pharaoh, Moses' opponent, had a hard heart. And he is definitely not a role model in the book of Exodus. It seems to be, to boot, a dangerous thing to have a hard heart. We have learned to fear hardening of the arteries, and rare is the man not to know someone who has been laid low by a heart attack.

Yet what is hard-heartedness? Is it all one thing? Perhaps "he has a hard heart" calls to mind a Dickensian landlord throwing out a tenant without mercy—hard-heartedness is mercilessness. Or we might think a hard heart is manifested when a person passes by a scene of wayside violence without being affected. An indifferent heart seems hardened to suffering. In our culture we think of the heart as the organ of love, the metaphorical seat of the emotions, the place at the core of things where feelings ought to be most true and most pure. We use the heart shape as an iconic substitute for the word "love," as in "I ♥ VA" which I was sorry to learn meant "I love Virginia" (not Victor Austin).

All these associations of the heart with emotions are incomplete. What they leave out is something that we find in the way the Bible uses the word. There is a connection between the heart and understanding. The disciples did not *understand* about the loaves, Mark says, because their *hearts* were hardened. So beyond mercilessness or indifference or a failure of emotion, a hard heart can also be one that fails to understand.

As there are different things a hard heart might mean, so there are different ways that the human animal can fail to understand something. One way, of course, has to do with our emotions. It is possible for our emotions to get in the way of our understanding. We're angry, say, or obsessing about something else, and so we fail to see something that's right in front of us. "He was so angry he couldn't see." Or: "If you would stop worrying about X, you'd understand."

But there are other ways we might fail to understand. Sometimes the thing to be understood is very difficult, and we're not yet prepared to understand it. For example, you can't grasp calculus until you're able to get around in algebra. Before we can understand a complicated matter, we need to be able to grasp its parts, and that might take time and hard work and good opportunity.

Yet there's more. Another way we can fail to understand is when something totally unexpected happens. I recently saw again the film "United 93," about the 4th plane taken over by terrorists on 9/11, the one that crashed in a field in Pennsylvania. That film captures the difficulty of understanding something, not because people's emotions are uncontrolled, and not because what is happening is intrinsically difficult to understand, but because it is totally unexpected. Air traffic control, following American Airlines flight 11 (the first to be affected), watches that plane deviate from path and turn silent. Has it been hijacked, one man wonders. Others are incredulous; we haven't had a hijacking since I-can't-remember-when. Later the plane's signal disappears somewhere over Manhattan, and they don't know what has happened.

Change the negative to the positive, and we can grasp where the disciples were in today's gospel. When the totally unexpected happens, it is impossible for human beings to take it in. There is no imputation of culpability that we can lay upon those men in the boat, rowing across the lake all night against a fierce headwind, when they are first frightened and then astounded when they see Jesus. Because what they were having to take in was *something that had never happened before*.

Never before in human history—nay, never before in the history of the cosmos—had there been a person who was both man and God. They knew him as a man. They could speak about him as they would about a man. He had a mother. He had feet and hands. He ate food. He talked with them. They knew him, too, as an extraordinarily strong and unusual man, "charismatic" we might say (in the sense of being attractive). He had commanded demons and they listened to him. He had healed disease. Now he had taken five loaves and fed five thousand men. Now he was passing by them on the lake, calm and commanding in the midst of a storm that had completely thwarted their own work. Now he was showing them that he was God.

It is not easy to take in. It changes the way we think about him, the way we talk about him—and it took Christians a few centuries to get their language right. Now we not only say that he has a mother and a body and eats food and talks with his friends; we say also that he has no beginning, that he has always existed, that he causes change and that nothing that is changeable can make him change, that he is the source of being and light and life. On the one hand, his body gets dirty and needs washing from time to time. On the other hand, he is the one who made water.

Our own hearts are hard, too, especially in this sense of not understanding something that's totally unexpected. In particular, it is very hard to take in the change this means for the future—our future, and the future of the world. But if the totally unexpected has happened in Jesus, then in God's future there is also the totally unexpected for us. Our future, it seems, has the shape of resurrection. Let me put it most baldly. The world expects death; Christians expect resurrection. The world expects the universe ultimately to be meaningless. Some point in the future, our sun will flare up and destroy any life that might be left on earth. Another five, ten billion years and the universe will be extended and cold, ever expanding into a dark and frigid eternity. But Christians expect God to renew his creation, and to transform this world into something eternally meaningful and good. The world expects wars, and interpersonal animosities, and conflicts—in a word, "difference"—to be the last word. But Christians believe the last word is peace, not war, reconciliation, not conflict, a unity that transcends difference. *It has never happened before. It is totally unexpected.* But it has come to be in Christ.

Let me try to put all this in an image. You and I, we are in that boat. And life is hard, full of struggle. Our task is to practice hope in small ways and large, day in and day out. Because in Jesus something totally unexpected has happened. And the way things will turn out is not the way that was expected. The way things will turn out is not the way that still is, by so many, expected.