

Sermon Easter 2011, 24 April 2011
Subject: Resurrection 1 Corinthians 15, 1-11

Dear Parishioners, dear friends of the Swiss Church

Every year at Easter I remember the vivid arguments I used to have with the Minister of the church in Wil, who gave my confirmation classes. With the persuasive power and persistence that only a 16 year old can have, I questioned him by saying that it was absolutely not possible that Jesus, having died, was then resurrected on the third day and that He actually physically became alive again. My confirmation class Minister was a strong advocate of the bodily resurrection and for him there was no doubt that Jesus became a real person again after His resurrection. 15 years later I am still questioning this belief in the bodily resurrection – for me this explanation does not go together well with my doubting spirit and my rational way of explaining other things in the world. So I am still searching for different ways of understanding what had happened to the disciples when they had an encounter with the resurrected Christ, as it happened for example to Paul, as we heard today in the reading from 1 Corinthians.

Let us therefore listen again to this incredible story by singing three more Verses of the hymn: RG 466, 5-7 “Gelobt sei Gott im höchsten Thron”

One way for me of having a different approach to that subject becomes evident in the image that you find on the back of the order of service. You will see there a picture of a forest, which has grown naturally in the form of a heart. This forest is to be found in Voh, which is the main Island of New Caledonia. If you imagine all those people who live on the Island, they cannot actually see that they are surrounded by the symbol of love, all they can see are trees. They cannot see the love symbol because they do not have the bigger picture of their island. Only from a higher perspective, such as an aeroplane, can one see that the trees form a heart. So a person can stand right in the middle of a heart without noticing it. I think this situation can be compared to how limited our human being's perspective is when it comes to seeing miracles. We can only see and understand what is within our limited way of seeing and understanding things. As I said in the beginning with my

rational and questioning mind I cannot believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ. But this is only *one* perspective and it is of course a very limited one. It is not the perspective from above, and of course not the perspective of God. I feel this example shows very well that the Resurrection is something that goes beyond our understanding. And if we try to understand Jesus' resurrection by saying it was a bodily resurrection in order to fully grasp what happened that day in Jerusalem, we narrow the message down and it therefore loses some of its powerful and liberating strength.

When we listen carefully to how Paul describes his experience of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians, we notice one thing straight away: every verb is written in the passive form, so it literally says: "it was seen" and "it was being made visible". This passive form is used in the Bible when God is the active agent in what is happening, it is the so-called theological passive. This means that whatever Paul experienced, saw and heard, it was initiated by God and it was only happening to him. So from the beginning, the appearance of the resurrected Christ was seen as something that is beyond normal human experience, and as something that can only happen to you if it was initiated by God. It is not something that can be controlled by our own effort, nor is it affected by our own merit.

Another interesting fact is that the appearances of Christ did not all happen on the same day, but instead, the women at the grave, the disciples in their everyday lives and the Apostle Paul, all had their own experiences of the Resurrection when it was time for each one of them to have it. We would all like to narrow down the Resurrection by saying that it happened on the third day. But actually Paul, who says that he was the last one to whom Jesus Christ appeared, saw the resurrected one much later. And yet again this time frame is something that goes beyond our understanding.

It is encouraging to think that all of us can also wait for our own personal experience of the resurrected. All of sudden we might be touched by the words and the doings of Jesus and we discover the hope of a life after death for our own lives. Or maybe some feel that they have already had that experience and they are very much aware that Jesus was resurrected. Wherever you stand and however you feel about this story of the resurrection, it is your personal way of trying to understand an event that goes beyond our normal way of relating to this world. And as we believe in the

Christian tradition we cannot *make* this understanding happen in our lives, but it will happen to us. It will be given to us as a gift by the grace of God. So for those who are still waiting to have a personal Easter experience, as well as for those who have already had it, we all know that it is only by grace that we can see God. And whenever we think back of that forest that grew in the shape of a heart, we remember that we do not see the whole picture of what is possible, and that our view is very limited. Therefore I would like to finish with a phrase from the Bible text that we heard today, which contains a lot of wisdom:

But by the grace of God I am what I am.

Amen