

DUSTING FOR FINGERPRINTS

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Lectionary Reading: Matthew 28:1-10.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

LOTR: The Two Towers — The Tracking Scene with Aragorn

Happy Easter to all of you. Let me begin by describing a scene from a movie. Probably more than half of you have seen this one. It's from one of the *Lord of the Rings* series, *The Two Towers*, and this scene stretches the imagination. I chuckled when I saw it for the first time. Aragorn, the lead character, who is one of the heroes, is known for his impressive tracking skills.

At this point, their fellowship of nine has been split up. In this particular scene, three Hobbits, including Aragorn, are tracking, trying to find and save two Hobbits who have been captured. They come across the dead bodies of those who had captured them, but they can't find the Hobbits themselves. The trackers fear that their friends have also been killed.

So one of the three, Gimli the dwarf, says, "We have failed them."
[Aragorn looks down, and tracks in the dirt catch his attention.]
He looks closely and concludes, "A Hobbit lay here, and the other."
And then he examines the dirt ever more closely, "They crawled."

[He starts to follow the tracks, with Legolas, the elf, and Gimli following.]

He concludes from this nondescript dirt, "Their hands were bound."

Then continuing, "Their bonds were cut." As he holds up a piece of broken rope.

"They ran over here . . . and were followed."

"The tracks lead away from the battle! Into . . . Fangorn Forest."

[And all three of them look up into the very dense forest, where the tracks disappear.]

For Great Tracking: *Princess Bride*, *The Fugitive*, *Last of the Mohicans*

Of course, this is exactly what happened. We're supposed to believe in Aragorn's tracking skills and to be utterly impressed. But I had to laugh inside as someone who has tried to track animals in the woods. The notion of following the tracks of two Hobbits in the middle of a battle scene, walking, then crawling, then running, sometimes with their hands bound, sometimes not, might be pressing it a bit.

There are other movies too that have great tracking scenes in them. Three of them are:

- *Princess Bride*, with Robin Wright as Princess Buttercup and Mandy Patinkin as Inigo Montoya (his father was killed, by the way), and then the evil Prince Humperdinck, who had extraordinary tracking skills.
- There is *The Fugitive*, with Tommy Lee Jones and Harrison Ford. Jones, using both high- and low-tech tracking skills, tries to catch up with the good Dr. Kimble, who in turn is trying to track and find the real killer.

**“You Stay Alive! You Survive!
I Will Find You”**

- Then there is my absolute favorite of all time, *Last of the Mohicans*, with Daniel Day Lewis and Madeline Stowe. They have fallen in love but are captured by Indians and are about to be forcibly separated. Daniel Day Lewis calls out to his beloved, “Stay alive, I WILL find you.”

At the request of my wife, theme music plays. I get emotional just hearing that. I have seen this movie about fifty times, and if you’ll humor me, here’s the fuller quote. Daniel Day Lewis calls out to his beloved, Madeline Stowe. He shouts:

“You stay alive! If they don’t kill you, they’ll take you north up to the Huron lands. Submit, do you hear? You’re strong! You survive! You survive! You stay alive, no matter what occurs! I will find you! No matter how long it takes, no matter how far. I will find you!”

They are forcibly separated, but eventually he does find her. Right after this, as they’re being torn apart, the sound track provides a beautiful, haunting song by the Celtic group Clannad, with the refrain, “No matter where you go, I will find you.”

These scenes, these examples of tracking, whether silly or serious, came to mind when I found a marvelous saying by the medieval doctor of the church, Saint Bonaventure.

Even though Bonaventure is from 800 years ago, I read him with interest today because he was one of the first to insist upon integrating faith and reason, long before the advent of science. The saint saw faith and reason, not at odds at all but as complementary, supplementary to each other. He thought of Christ as the “one true master,” who taught this: (1) Reason begins with faith. It doesn’t end with faith; it begins with faith. (2) Then it is developed through rational understanding, through thinking about it, examining it, figuring it out, reasoning. (3) Finally, reason is perfected by mystical union with God.

Saint Bonaventure was 800 years ahead of his time. He was the one to bring the Franciscan Order into prominence. Saint Francis himself was a paragon of humility and had no desire to create an order, let alone become a leader of anything.

**Saint Francis Asks for a Miracle;
Baby John Becomes Buona Ventura**

The story of Bonaventure’s name, by the way, is of interest:

In the early decades of the 13th Century, his mother was grieving terribly that her young son, John, was becoming increasingly sick and actually looked as though he was going to die. Desperate, she turned to the most saintly man she knew — in fact, one of the

most saintly people who have ever walked the earth, Saint Francis of Assisi.

When his mother arrived in the company of Francis, the saint raised John's little body to heaven, asking God for a miracle. After his prayer, Francis was assured that the young boy would be just fine.

And then, as Francis handed the infant back to his mother, he received a brief vision, like a flash of insight, a flash of prophecy about the enormously holy and wonderful life that this little baby would lead. And so, Francis stared into the baby's eyes and said in Italian, "O buona ventura!" ("Oh, good fortune!").

The name stuck. From then on, the child was no longer "John" but Buona Ventura ("Bonaventure").

This being the stuff of legend, who knows how historically accurate it might be, but the story is found in Bonaventure's own writings, presumably a story his mother told him. John was a boy of five when Saint Francis died.

Bonaventure later wrote:

- "The magnitude of things . . . clearly manifests . . . the wisdom and goodness of the triune God, who by power, presence, and essence exists uncircumscribed in all things." Read that again. It's a deep thought.
- He wrote that God is "within all things, but not enclosed; outside all things, but not excluded; above all things, but not aloof; below all things, but not debased."
- And with a tip of the hat to geometry, he wrote that God is one "whose center is everywhere and

whose circumference is nowhere."

St. Bonaventure Says All Created Things Are Fingerprints of God

- And then note this list: He wrote that "The origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order of all created things are the very 'footprints' and 'fingerprints' ('vestigia') of God." He used the word "vestigia" — an Italian word meaning that which is evidence, that which is left behind to be seen — to stand for footprints, fingerprints.

It was this notion of God's fingerprints (thinking of Tommy Lee Jones) or God's footprints (thinking of Daniel Day Lewis) that caught my attention.

Throughout his life and all of his writings, Bonaventure continued that theme, that the origin, magnitude, multitude, beauty, fullness, activity, and order of all created things are the "footprints" and the "fingerprints" of God.

Sometimes Bonaventure would get a touch negative, just like the rest of humanity, become a little judgmental. He also wrote this: "Whoever . . . is not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind; whoever is not awakened by such outcries is deaf; whoever does not praise God because of all these effects is dumb; whoever does not discover the First Principle from all such signs is a fool."

There you have it. We have all known some who are blind, deaf, dumb, and foolish. Actually, we usually find them officiating at

sports events. They're unusually good at pinball, though.

The Most Obvious Footprint or Fingerprint of God Is Life

And so, on this Easter morning, I would like to suggest that *the* most obvious footprint or fingerprint of God is life.

Here are five of the footprints we're thinking about:

- The biosphere. In your imagination, let's go up to the moon for a moment, and look at earth. Remember that historic picture, the Big Blue Marble picture, and think about the biosphere for a moment in your mind's eye. Life in the form of millions of species is found from the depths of the ocean to the highest mountains, from the wettest to the driest, from the coldest to the hottest.
- Or think about our home in the evolutionary sense that the millions of species upon the earth *now* represent only one tenth of one percent of all the species that *have lived* on this planet.
- Or in the sense of the web of life, think of the thousands of interdependencies that are becoming known to science.
- Or in the sense of symbiosis, think of the countless plant and animal and microbial communities that depend upon each other.
- Or in the spiritual sense, in which we, merely as individuals that are

part of a communal species, recognize that the death of our bodies doesn't mean the death of who we really are inside — a spirit, a soul, and an energy form that for a time has a body.

My Easter Message: I Am...the Life; my Equation Is God Equals Life

Jesus said, "I am . . . the life" (John 14:6), meaning, in Aramaic, that God is life. Putting it into equation form, God = Life. And these infinite varieties of life about and within us are the fingerprints, the footprints that even the most blind, deaf, and dumb children can follow.

On this Easter morn, I would like to suggest that Resurrection is not so much a miracle from long ago, venerated ever since, but is an enduring reality. This is one of the more obvious footprints, made in the mud right alongside the path that everyone follows, such that even the most clueless persons notice it.

Seen this way, Resurrection isn't so much a miracle to be believed or not believed, proven or disproven, let alone argued about. Rather, see it as an invitation to look more deeply at what is happening everywhere and always.

Whether it is Jesus or whether it is you or me or whether it is any other member of the Universal Body of Christ, none can truly die. We are part of and participating in something eternal — namely, divinity, which equals Life.

Resurrection Is not a Cosmic Trans- Action but a Human Transformation

Theologian Fr. Richard Rohr* adds this:

“If we are to speak of miracles, the most miraculous thing of all is that God uses the very thing that would normally destroy us — the tragic, the sorrowful, the painful, the unjust, the Good Fridays — to transform and enlighten us. Now, we are indestructible, and there are no absolute dead ends. This is what we mean when we say we are ‘saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus.’ This is not some cosmic transaction [born of divine ap-

peasement], but a human transformation to a higher level of love and consciousness.”

And this is a path that anyone and everyone can follow.

Amen.

*Richard Rohr is a Franciscan contemporary theologian and spiritual teacher.