

The Meaning of Resurrection

Easter Sunday, April 8, 2007

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Luke 24:1- 11

The story of the Resurrection stretches to the breaking point what we know to be true about the world. It's a miracle story to end all miracle stories. Dead people don't come back to life. Sometimes they are resuscitated, certainly, but people don't lie dead in a tomb for three days and then suddenly bounce back, alive and picking up where their lives left off. At this stage in my own faith life, I have come to believe that many, maybe most of the Bible's healing stories are more than metaphor. Jesus had an extraordinary power to heal. I continue to have trouble, though, believing many of the miracle stories. I have my own interpretation of some of these: For instance, the multiplication of bread and fish could very easily have happened this way: People had come long distances to hear Jesus talk. They had taken with them a first century version of a bag lunch: Dried fish and bread. So moved were they by Jesus' words about God's love for us and about how we are supposed to love one another, that when it was dinner time, instead of each person hunkering down in an obscure corner of some field to scarf down dinner, they stayed right where they were. They shared what they had brought with others. Suddenly there was more than enough to go around. The miracle here is that in a very short period of time Jesus was able to transform a group of heretofore strangers into a caring and sharing community.

In fact, transformation as I see it, is what was at the heart of all of Jesus's teachings and actions. He was intent on transforming not only individuals but also the world.

The most perplexing of all of the miracle stories in the New Testament has got to be the story of the resurrection. It is so perplexing, in fact, that I once put all four gospel resurrection stories side by side. I wanted to find out what this resurrected Jesus looked like. Just for fun, I did this again, this week. Here's what I found out:

In Mark, which is the first gospel narrative to be written, we aren't told anything at all about what Jesus looks like. Mark simply reports that Jesus is no longer in the tomb. An angel is there instead; and the angel tells the women who have come there to put aromatic spices on Jesus' body, that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

In Matthew, Jesus does appear to the women at the tomb. They recognize him straight off, kneel at and actually take hold of his feet, and worship him. Later in Matthew, Jesus appears to the disciples as well. That's when Jesus tells them, to "Go and make disciples of all nations."

In Luke, the same women mentioned in Mark and Matthew find an empty tomb, but as in Mark, they do not see Jesus. Jesus appears first to some disciples walking along the road to Emmaus, only for some reason, this Jesus is unrecognizable. The disciples walk with this presumed stranger all the way to Emmaus. They invite the stranger to eat dinner with them which he does. During the breaking of the bread, the disciples' eyes are finally opened and they recognize him. Immediately, Jesus, poof, disappears. There is a wonderful sketch by Rembrandt that I've copied for you and included in your bulletins as a bulletin insert. It's a sketch of Jesus just after he has disappeared at table. I call this "Rembrandt's beam me up, Scotty," resurrection sketch.

Jesus appears a second time in Luke, this time in , and before all of his disciples, minus Judas. This time, no one has trouble recognizing Jesus. More than that, he eats broiled fish with them and he invites them to touch his wounds. This is no ghost. This is a flesh and blood human being WITH, it seems, a fully functional digestive tract.

Finally, in John, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb by herself and discovers it empty. As she stands at the entrance crying, Jesus comes to her offering comfort. Just as the men on the road to Emmaus, she fails to recognize Jesus right away. When he calls her by name, she drops to his feet crying out, "Rabbi!" In Matthew, remember, the women at the tomb touch Jesus' feet. This time, though, Jesus says, "Do not touch me. I have not yet ascended to my father." In John, Jesus appears twice more—this time to the entire body of disciples, again, minus Judas. In the first appearance to the disciples, he walks through a closed and locked door, which gives the impression that he is an ephemeral being although a fully recognizable ephemeral being. Yet, when Jesus appears a second time before the disciples, in that same locked room, Jesus invites doubting Thomas to touch his wounds. (I've included another Rembrandt sketch in your bulletin, this one of a Doubting Thomas touching Jesus' wounds). Again, Jesus is very much flesh and blood.

We could spend the rest of our sermon time talking about these different accounts and which one or ones are most believable. We could turn this Sunday into our own live documentary, "Resurrected Jesus Sightings of the 1st Century." It would be like the documentary about the Shroud of Turin or the documentary about the ossuary which is purported to have been the repository of Jesus's bones. Or, maybe we could have a full blown discussion about what the resurrected Jesus looked like. I even could ask for a show of hands: Which story do you think most accurately reflects what happened on Easter Sunday and immediately following? Was he a hallucination? Was he a ghost? Was he flesh and blood? At the end of our time together, we would be no closer to understanding what this resurrected Jesus really looked like. Worse, we would have missed an opportunity to dig into the meaning behind the accounts. Surely, Jesus would have us NOT be so concerned with details, but the meaning behind the details. That meaning has to do with transformation—like I said earlier, Jesus had everything to do with transformations—both the world's transformation and ours as well.

If you were here last Sunday you know that I said there was a political motive behind Jesus's entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. Jesus lived in an era commonly referred to as the Pax Romana—the Peace of Rome. The Peace of Rome stretched from 27 BC to 180 AD. But that time period is really a misnomer. There was peace, but peace bought at a price. Peace was maintained by cruel oppression. How cruel was it? In 4 BC, Rome crucified 2,000 insurrectionists in order to maintain the peace.

As we also learned last week, Jesus was leading a non-violent protest march that day as he approached the holy city amid the crowds' singing and shouting loud Hosannas. Jesus was foolhardy in this. I mean, really! Did he think that he and an unarmed group of peasants could offer a challenge to Rome? Yet, Jesus had two things going for him. One, he had the masses on his side. In his three years preaching to peasants in the countryside under the radar of Roman authorities, he had amassed a large following. Two, Jesus had right on his side. Even the Judean leaders, whose loyalty had been bought by Rome, knew that a serious injustice was being perpetrated against Judea's ever growing peasant population. So, what went wrong with Jesus's plan?

If you were here on Maundy Thursday, you know that Jesus was captured at night and away from the crowds. The Roman authorities knew that the only way they could grab Jesus without causing a peasant riot, was under the cover of darkness and when he was virtually alone. Scholars believe that Jesus was taken to Herod's palace for his trial. By that time, Herod had been dead for 34 years. His palace was used by Roman governors when they visited. Pontius Pilate was living there temporarily during the Jews' Holy Week. It is doubtful that the unwashed masses would have been allowed into the palace to witness that trial. Even though some of the gospels report that a large crowd was present, more likely, Jesus was tried before a small gathering of people who were loyal to. They were priests and scribes who had pledged allegiance to, miscellaneous Roman officials and members of the Roman guard.

Jesus was tried, convicted as a rebel to Rome, and then executed in a manner reserved for insurrectionists. He was executed in broad daylight. His limp and bloody crucified body was meant to be a sign and symbol of Rome's great power.

This was Rome's big mistake. It's one thing to crucify a violent revolutionary, but Jesus had not been violent. And Jesus had spoken the truth about God. He was known as a teacher of God, a rabbi. Jesus was THE most innocent of victims of oppressive Empire.

Jesus death exposed for all of **Jerusalem** to see, and with the spread of Christianity all the **world** to see, not just Rome's power but the evil nature of that power—a godless power. Therefore Jesus won his showdown with even though in the process he lost his life.

The meaning of Christ's resurrection is that you can't kill justice, you can't murder goodness, and you can't execute hope. Oppression and violence never have the last word. God's power always tilts toward justice. With Jesus's death and resurrection, the empty cross ceased to be the sign and symbol of Rome's power but Rome's injustice. Later it became the sign and symbol of the Christian Church—God's answer to Empire.

Thus ends the political saga of Jesus, his march to Jerusalem, his trial, his crucifixion and his resurrection. As last week, though, we need to put its meaning into a 21st century context. I think that there are several messages here for us. One has to do with Empire. Today's versions of Roman Empire have learned their lesson. Leaders of oppressive regimes know that exposure of that oppression leads to their demise. For that reason, today most oppression is shrouded in darkness. Just so, the Germans lied about their concentration camps, the president of Darfur denies that genocide is being committed in his country, and the US tortures in secret its captives at and Abu Ghraib. Revealing the true nature of oppression is the beginning of the end of that oppression—so it must be kept secret. But as we know, secrets don't last for ever.

There is another message that we can take from this story. It is about sin. One interpretation of Jesus's death and resurrection has to do with human sin. Christ died For our Sins. God demanded a fitting sacrifice for humanity's horrendous sins, and Jesus, God's son was the only sacrifice that God would accept. I have never been able to understand the rationale behind that interpretation. A better one, I believe is that Jesus died not **for** our sin, but certainly **because** of our sin. What sin is that? It is our failure to stand against oppressive powers. Our silence in the face of horrendous evil is, in effect, collusion with those powers Jesus would have us overcome.

One final message we can derive from the story of the resurrection. Like the story of the feeding of the 5,000, this too, is less a story about a miracle and more a story of transformation; a transformation of the world. And when the world is transformed, we are transformed as well—from despairing individuals weighed down by the evil we witness, to a community of hopeful believers. Instead of bread and dried fish we share our faith that the world will be won for justice, goodness and hope. Therefore, we look forward to the full realization of God's kingdom as we sing our Easter Alleluias.
Amen

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