

Easter Life

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“But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” -- John 20:31

I know it's been a while since Easter evening, and some of you may not yet have fully recovered from the ham-and-scalloped-potatoes food coma into which you slipped after church last Sunday, or the lingering effects of your post-Lenten chocolate binge, but do you recall what you were doing last Sunday evening?

Perhaps you were saying good-bye to the last of your guests who had come to Easter dinner, or perhaps you were one of those guests who was preparing to head home after an abundant celebratory feast.

Maybe you were putting away the last of the dishes and trying to squeeze the last of the leftovers into the already over-crowded refrigerator.

Or perhaps all of the Easter repast was past, and you were walking the dog or setting out the rubbish bins on a beautiful early spring evening, as I was, and positioning yourself mentally and psychologically for the start of your work week, which I was not.

Whatever you were doing, it's almost certain that you were not having visions of the risen Christ, which is what Jesus's first followers were doing on their first Easter evening together.

The account of those visions constitutes the first half of the twentieth chapter of John's gospel, which I read for you a few minutes ago.

“When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week” is the way John begins the story, which follows immediately on the story of Mary Magdalene's encounter with the risen Jesus Christ in the garden on Easter morning. That was the lesson last Sunday morning, and even though you and I have lived through a week of real time, the disciples in scripture have only made it to the end of that same day, a day that was doubtless filled with far more questions than answers.

What on earth could Mary have meant by saying that she had seen the Lord? What did that mean for her? What did that mean for them? And what did that mean for Jesus?

And what was going to become of them and their little Jesus movement? Was this their ignominious end, as the death of the leader had been for so many other freedom movements in Roman-occupied Judea? Were the authorities satisfied with their grim Good Friday work?

And what of the mob that had been stirred up by Jesus's opponents and who had done him to death – was their rage assuaged, or were they still on the prowl, hoping to tear out the Jesus movement root and branch?

Those were the sorts of questions that probably haunted that first Easter Day for the first followers of Jesus, and that long and fearful day had nothing whatsoever to do with bunnies or eggs or baskets or chocolates. It was a fall-back moment, a time of running for cover, a time of quaking with fear, John tells us, behind locked doors.

And what were the disciples afraid of? John says it was “the Jews,” and here we have to pause briefly for a baby Bible study of a phrase that has been the source of much

suffering for the Jewish people and which has been used by us Christians to our everlasting shame. That simple phrase “the Jews” has been badly and sometimes willfully misunderstood, and no respectable preacher on today's lesson should gloss it without comment.

The Greek of the New Testament says what it says -- “for fear of the Jews” -- and it says that four times in John's gospel – here and at 7:13, 9:22, and 19:38. If you look at those passages, what you'll see is that the Jews who were beginning to believe that Jesus might be their Messiah – we commonly call those Jews Jesus's disciples – those Jews were afraid of other, more powerful and influential Jews who didn't share their belief. In fact, the majority of Jewish people of Jesus's day did not believe that Jesus was their longed-for Messiah; they searched the scriptures just as diligently as Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, or Paul had, and they did not find in those texts the evidence that Jesus's followers found, pointing to him as God's Anointed.

John, like all the evangelists, was Jewish, and when he refers to “the Jews” he's referring to the group to which he belongs but with which he disagrees as far as Jesus's identity is concerned; and that Jewish-Jewish disagreement is the source of the conflict we read about in the New Testament. It is historically anachronistic to see Jesus's first followers as Christians and his first opponents as Jews; at the beginning, they were all Jews, including Jesus, and only later, and outside Palestine, were Jesus's followers known as Christians. On Easter evening, we are told of one group of Jews cowering in fear of another group of Jews, and here's why.

In a world where there was no separation of church and state, and where the Jewish people were already regarded with a certain hostility because of their refusal to embrace Roman civic religion, this group of Jewish sectarians, who would eventually become known as Christians, was doubly unpopular. The Romans didn't like them because they were creating unrest; and the Pharisees and the Sadducees – the guardians of Jewish tradition – didn't like them because, in their words, they were perverting the tradition. And who defines the tradition? The leaders do; and they and those they control are the folks Jesus's disciples are afraid of, which is why some modern translations say “the Jewish authorities” or “the Jewish leaders” instead of simply “the Jews.”

I've dwelt at some length on what may seem to some of you a rather obscure historical footnote, but in fact many Christians have read texts such as our reading from John today as justification for forcing Jews to convert to Christianity, and when they refused to convert, their property, livelihoods, and even their very lives were sometimes destroyed. Christian anti-Semitism is a deep and shameful stain on Christianity, and one for which we continue to owe the Jewish people – Jesus's people – our enduring regret.

The situation on Easter evening was complicated, no one possessed all the facts, and the evangelists, including John, weren't trying to write history. They were writing theology, what we would today call Christian narrative theology, which is the telling of those stories by which we try to make sense of and to share with others our experience of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.

That's what John says he's doing in the verse that I've taken as my text, which is the end of chapter twenty: “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”

John believes, and Christians since John have believed, that there is power in stories, specifically the stories of Jesus as they have been preserved and handed down to us in Scripture and tradition. People who are largely ignorant of the Bible think that it's a

vast collection of rules – page after page of “Thou shalt” and “Thou shalt not” -- but people who've actually read the Bible know better.

The Bible is a library, the bulk of which is stories. The Bible begins with a story – you all know how it goes -- “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” -- and it ends with a story -- “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth.” And in between those stories of creation and re-creation are dozens and dozens of stories about God's endlessly creative work on our behalf.

God creates earth from the primordial chaos, Genesis tells us, and then there's nothing good for humans to eat because, as Genesis 2:5 says, there was neither rain nor anyone to till the ground. So God invents rain agriculture. That's another stage in the process of creation.

God creates a human being and realizes that community is necessary for people to be people in the fullness of their humanity, and so God creates a companion for the first earthling – another stage in the process of creation.

And so on and so forth. Story after story, telling us, for example, where the plurality of languages came from, why a certain place is called Gilgal, and how power corrupts even the most devout of rulers.

These stories ask us, again and again, “Can you see God, and God at work, in what has happened here?” And the authors of those stories ask that question that way not because they're trying to write history, but rather because they're trying to make sense of history. History isn't what happens to us; history is what we do with what happens to us. That's what makes history.

Consider 9/11. Think how different the history of the past fifteen years would have been had the United States reacted differently to that tragedy. Going to war was not our only option, and going to war the way we did was not our only option. We chose to respond to violence with more violence, refusing to believe in our own greatness of spirit and in our own capacity to absorb and transform suffering without inflicting suffering on others. We refused to heed, in Lincoln's words, the “better angels of our nature,” and we chose instead to vent our outrage and pain by collectively lashing out. We used our blood and treasure to do what our character, our intelligence, our patience, our wisdom, and our cooperation with our allies could better have done, which was to disrupt the flow of arms and money and communication to those who would wreak terror on others. We could have done that, and a great deal more besides to rid the world of terrorists, but we did not, which proves that history is not what happens to us; history is how we respond. Human history is not what happens; human history is what we create.

And that's what these first resurrection appearances of Jesus to his disciples are meant to show us – the options we have to shape our lives and thereby to shape history. Those frightened, confused, and doubtful disciples no more thought of themselves as shapers of history than you and I think of ourselves that way, but they were wrong and we are wrong and we're both wrong for the same reason: we allow doubt, rather than faith, to define us.

People who live on the basis of their doubts rather than on the basis of their faith never shape history. They respond to it, but they don't shape it. The people who move history beyond its perpetual cycle of suffering and violence are the people who allow their faith rather than their doubts to guide them.

And the faith of those first apostles was not what they thought; their faith was what they trusted, and that's why Doubting Thomas, confronted with his own vision of the risen Christ, doesn't say, “Aha, now I get it! Now I understand how it happened! Now I know why you're standing there in front of me, Jesus, just as you used to be. It's because God did this with your heart and then God did that with your lungs and then God did the other

thing with your mitochondria and – “

Not a bit of it! Thomas the Doubtful One doesn't have his questions answered; he has his faith confirmed. He joins his fellow believers in trusting that God's loving will for the world could not be thwarted even by the worst that we humans can and often do inflict on each other. Thomas doesn't offer explanations – he utters an exclamation: “My Lord and my God!” Thomas recognizes, in those wounds yet visible, that God had not given up on this sinful and broken world and, more importantly, that God had not given up on him.

That's what it means to say of Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” That's not a shout of Christian parochialism, and it's certainly not the battle-cry of Christian soldiers marching off to war. It's not the kind of toxic triumphalism that launched the Crusades of the eleventh century or the know-nothing fundamentalism of the nineteenth.

To acknowledge Jesus as our Lord and God is not to overcome doubt with proof; it's to overcome doubt with love. Love, as Jesus defined it and lived it, is the only proof of the resurrection you and I are ever going to get. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

We have warped our understanding of that verse by linking it to armed conflict, but Jesus never had armed conflict in mind when he uttered those words. To lay down one's life, as Jesus did, is not to perpetuate violence, but rather to break the cycle of violence in all its forms. That is love – real love, self-sacrificial love, Easter love. It's also Easter life.