

Third Sunday of Easter (A)
St. Peter's Church, Philadelphia
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
1 Peter 1: 17-23
Luke 24:13-35

Resurrecting Easter

We aren't finished with Easter yet—or—perhaps I should say—Easter isn't finished with us! And while I think we all might appreciate that Easter as a terribly important feast and event in the life of the Christian Church, we might also feel distant from any real comprehension of what it really means. Sure, we can reduce it to what we may have learned as children: Christ was raised from the dead. That's good! But what difference does it really make. Sure, we love the celebration of Easter, the wonderful hymns and music, the easter-egg hunt. It feels good to be appreciating spring and the re-emergence of nature all around us (except, perhaps, those with allergies)! But while conservative Christians might hammer away at the importance of belief in the actual bodily resurrection of Jesus, more liberal Christianity has become a bit agnostic about the details of the Easter event. Myself included. More than a few people have said to me: "I really don't know what happened on that Sunday morning. I'm not sure what I believe.

Last year I came across a book called *Resurrecting Easter: How the West lost and the East kept the original Easter Vision*. Its author is contemporary Scripture scholar and historian John Dominic Crossan, partnered with his wife, Sarah Sexton Crossan. One of the initial points that caught my attention was the observation that Scripture presents or represents scenes of all the major events in the life of Jesus—the incarnation, baptism, transfiguration, last supper, arrest, crucifixion and ascension. But there is no depiction of what actually happens to Jesus from the time he is placed in the tomb until the empty tomb is discovered by his followers. There might have been witnesses, namely the guards placed there to prevent a theft of the body. The various scriptural accounts have different explanations for the absence of the soldier's testimony, from the possibility that they were sleeping, to threats from the authorities not to tell what they knew. So in the absence of written accounts of what actually happened, the details of this event evolved through various artistic and iconic representations, which in turn shaped the theology of the resurrection. The Crossans engage in a meticulous investigation of the oldest extant Christian artifacts—mosaics, carvings and frescos—which adorned Churches and shrines dating back to the 4th century. From this there emerges two very different traditions with regard to the Resurrection: that of a solitary, individual resurrection of Jesus which dominated the Western or Latin church, as opposed to a more universal resurrection which became prominent in the Eastern or Orthodox church. In the case of the latter, Jesus is depicted as descending into Hell or the realm of Hades, of death, where he then leads all the just souls who are raised together into eternal life. Most importantly, there folks always include Adam and Eve, symbols of humanity as a whole.

When I was a kid, I was always a little puzzled by the phrase *He descended to the dead* which is part of the so-called Apostles Creed and is used as part of our baptismal service. As was the case with so much of what Roman Catholic Children learned in the old days, these things were rarely explained. We were simply supposed to believe them. In my mind, I just figured that Jesus needed someplace to hang out for a day or so between Friday and Sunday. He went there to assure all those folks that they would be raised at the end of time...like the rest of us. As time went on, and I began to conceive of the resurrection of

Jesus as something that effectively happens only to him, it became harder to understand what impact that might have on me and the rest of us, except as a kind of promise of that our destiny might be if we remain faithful. It's harder to appreciate how it changes anything here and now.

OK. Let's take a breath here. The theology of the resurrection and all the stories that support this theology are very complex, overlapping and even contradictory. We might notice this in the scripture readings we hear right after Easter. But one of the reasons I appreciated Crossan's scholarship is that it awakened me to deeper ways of thinking about this important event. It was also moving to see so many representations in early Christian art which, in my view, has always been superior to formal theology in leading us into the deep mysteries of faith. As with the story of Thomas the doubting Apostle last week, it's always better to be provoked and a bit confused than to be indifferent.

Of course, the full meaning of the Resurrection isn't revealed merely by the events related to the tomb, but by everything that follows in the diverse accounts of encounters with the risen Lord. The story of the meeting on the road to Emmaus has always been a powerful story for me. At the core of it, there is the surprising "reveal" of Jesus in the breaking of the bread. Those on the journey are confused and a bit perturbed by this "stranger" who seems to be oblivious to what has been unfolding in Jerusalem. They then present the account about Jesus as well as perhaps express their grief. Even when the stranger chides them for their slowness to believe, they don't quite get it. But they invite them to stay with them and to share a meal. It is only when Jesus breaks the bread that their eyes were opened, at which point Jesus vanishes. Yet they see him clearly at that point. *Weren't our hearts burning inside us as this one talked to us on the road...*

This is one of the ways the resurrection makes a difference. It unleashed the transcendent power of God manifested in Christ who remains mysteriously but intimately present to those who believe. And it also illuminates why the sharing of Eucharist is so important to the community of faith. The risen Jesus is made known in the breaking and the sharing of the bread, not as a static entity, but as an active power which is meant to continually shape and reshape our lives. The significance of the breaking of the bread goes far beyond a clever device in the story but signifies a principal way in which the Eucharist creates cohesion among Christians with the Risen Christ. It is also a reminder that Christianity doesn't really make sense in a world of isolation, but flourishes as a community, a common cause, a movement.

At the end of his work on the Resurrection, Crossan provides some interpretation of the implications he sees in the focus on the universal resurrection tradition, "one that takes into account our history as a species with war and peace, strife and lull. (But with ever escalating) violence--available and usable-- we start to see how Easter's universal vision speaks not just within Christianity, but within human evolution." This tradition does proclaim the conquest of death and the deliverance of humanity, and presents this through the Christ as the liberator. "On the one hand (Crossan continues), this Christ figure is clothed in magnificent robes, is suffused with transcendental glory and is moving forcibly with streaming garments. On the other hand, Christ has a cross inscribed halo and stands atop the gates of Hades set in cruciform shape; his wounds are visible, and he carries a ceremonial cross."

Crossan calls the Crucifixion a "parable against civilization" in that it confronts the "normal protocols of this world (which are) based on force and imperial coercion." So the Crucifixion and Resurrection story "is not simply about Jesus clashing and triumphing over Pilate, but about a hopeful option for humanity to find a way out of a violence based civilization." Whether or not we have a firm and unambiguous theory about the transcendental "truth" of the Resurrection may be far less important than our ability to be affected by these beliefs in our daily lives.

Christianity is about the paradox of embracing what God has already done for us and the commitment to continue to struggle to change the world through the confrontation of powerful structures and a kind of *non-violent resistance* represented by everyone from Jesus to Martin Luther King Jr. and those who follow in this same model of courage and faith. To live like this is to be “saved” from the corrupt nature of the world, and to live more fully into the revealed realm of God. The Resurrection might be a template for how we see ourselves and one another, how we recognize the Christ in the humble as well as the most consequential events of our lives, and how we imagine ongoing emergence from death into life.

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