

SPG#165 EASTER A
March 23, 2008 – Fr. Charles Pope

Acts 10:34-43

Colossians 3:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10

I want to remind everyone that today is Easter. And in the Church it is a day of festive celebration. But I think there is more than one way to celebrate Easter. One way is to celebrate the fact of the resurrection.

We have heard the story as recorded in today's gospel in Matthew, how the two women, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, went to visit the tomb of Jesus. The tomb is guarded by soldiers, who had been put there at the request of the Pharisees. When the women arrive there is an earthquake, an angel descends, rolls back the stone from the door of the tomb, and sits on it. The guards, as it is recorded shook and became as dead men. Matthew says the appearance of the angel was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.

Today we celebrate the fact of the resurrection, the fact that the angel spoke to the two Marys, told them not to be afraid, told them that Jesus was not there, that he had been raised. The angel showed them the empty tomb and said that Jesus would meet them in Galilee. The two women begin to leave in "fear and great joy," it says. As they are leaving they encounter Jesus. He greets them and tells them that he will meet them and the other disciples in Galilee.

Those are the basic facts of the resurrection as recorded by

Matthew.

And we can celebrate the facts of the resurrection one more time. We can celebrate the truth of a story that we have heard many times. And I think for many Christians that the celebration of Easter is a celebration of a "what." That is it is a celebration of a story that has been heard before. It is a celebration of facts that we have encountered before. And in that frame of reference, the church year is a cycle of celebrations of facts that were once recorded by people serving as reporters. And these reported facts have been celebrated over and over again.

The central fact is that Jesus rose from the dead. And as a fact, many have debated whether it really happened for centuries. In a book entitled The Passover Plot the author proposes that Jesus was merely drugged, not dead. And so, on one level, the issue is what are the facts? Did it really happen? Do you subscribe to it?

But on another level, beyond the debated fact of the resurrection, is the sharing of the story of the resurrection. The story is about living, breathing human beings like you and me who encountered Jesus as risen. The story is about two women visiting Jesus' tomb who experienced an earthquake and an angel who appeared as lightning clothed with snow. It is about these two women who encounter Jesus as risen.

So that is the story of what happened via Matthew. But in reading the story repeatedly and steeping yourself in it, one can get a sense of something more than facts, more than just occurrences. And in that provocation one can wonder about the earthquake. It does not say they were thrown to the ground. But it is indicated that it was more than a mere vibration. The account of the guards who became as dead men also begs a question. What is it like to see guards who have become as dead men? And then there is the angel who appeared like lightning, and who was clothed in something resembling snow. Again the invitation to wonder, the invitation to be provoked, the invitation to put oneself in the story.

And, behind the scenes, the story is also about those who wrote the story down. In my own study I have come to see that the early church was heavily involved in the writing down of these events. In reaching out with my imagination, I think that the two Marys, told what they had seen many times. And perhaps their original account was shall we say unabridged. And those who heard were profoundly affected by their words. At some point, someone had the idea of writing down the story for readers to appreciate. And when they did that they discovered that readers could be as profoundly moved by the story as those who had actually been there.

The reader then moved from searching for facts and verification to

becoming a witness. And in the words of the story it was if they were there. I have come to see that these writers never meant for the resurrection story to be celebrated as a mere fact.

Rather they meant that the readers themselves would become involved in the story. The reader joins the two women as they are filled with fear and joy. The reader witnesses the fantastic angel. The reader has some experience of the guards as dead men, and some experience of the earthquake. The reader becomes part of the story.

So, it is important that we not stop with the what of the resurrection and get into the who of it. Because the who is about those women. It is about guards who appear as dead. It is about an angel. It is about Jesus himself. It is about you and me.

The disciples had known Jesus as teacher, miracle worker, prophet, friend. Peter even proclaimed, "You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God." They walked with him, ate with him, stayed overnight in towns with him. They listened to him, questioned him, doubted him. They knew him, and they loved him.

There had been times when they had not understood him and his strange teachings. They could not take it in when he said that he must die and rise again.

But for all the experiences, the teachings, the lively discussions, for all the healings, after the crucifixion, the followers of Jesus

could not get past one inescapable fact. He was dead. They had scattered when the trumped up charges came, and watched from a distance as he was crucified and as he died.

Death has a way of getting our attention. It seems that no matter what was said before death, or what was done, death has a reality all its own. The disciples were stunned, in shock, grief-stricken.

But then the women experienced the earthquake, the guards, the angel, and Jesus himself. In those resurrection days the spell of death was broken. Then the disciples remembered all that he had said, all that he had taught. They knew that who he was as Son of God and what he said and did had come together in one fantastic fulfillment.

And that is the truth for the ages. That is the open ended story for all followers. Jesus walked the earth as the Son of God, the one who was fully God and fully human simultaneously. That is who he was and is. We tend to get tangled up in the many whats amid society's opinions, options, and alternatives. But in the Christian life the final analysis has to do with recognition of the risen Lord.

When Jesus was asked what was most important to believe, he responded to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself.

He also said at the Last Supper, Do this in remembrance of me.

Remember me.

Somewhere between discovery and recognition the followers of Jesus encountered the risen Lord. May it be so for us in our 21st century lives. Let us search for the facts. Let us have our opinions. Let us debate the issues. But as we stand in that empty tomb with those two women, let us open our hearts to the magic of Easter. And as we stand with them, let us pray for a sense of the fear and joy they felt that day. We know what he said and did. It is written down. The reader has become a witness.

We know who he is in our hearts. It comes together. It did happen. It is happening. He said it would. Christ the Lord is risen today.

Amen