

SPG#202, EASTER

April 12, 2009

I think it would be fair to say that this Easter 2009 we are hard to impress. For Easter is about good news and triumph over death. But this past year via mass media we hear mostly bad news, of economic downturn, loss of jobs, foreclosures, climate change, terrorism, war, and the continuing misery of flood victims.

And the news about how long all of this will last can also be seen as grim. There are some who say we are looking at a permanent change in the standard of living of Americans. There are some who say that economically things will be like this or worse for years or longer. So this year, in 2009, we are used to bad news. So Easter may seem like a celebration that occurs in spite of the reality of pervasive bad news. And we in the church, in our desire to be faithful will again play the role of those who would celebrate.

But this year perhaps we find it harder to let go and truly be joyful. So in this celebration of 2009 let us be cognizant of the realities of life around us and how it affects Easter 2009.

In the Revised Common Lectionary in Year B for today we are given two options for the resurrection story, one from John and one from Mark. In the story from John Mary Magdalene first sees that the stone has been rolled away from the tomb. She goes and tells Peter and the “disciple whom Jesus loved,” presumably the Apostle John. They run to the tomb and find it empty, and return to tell the others. But Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. While she is weeping, she sees two angels in the tomb, and Jesus himself appears to her. But she does not recognize him. When she does she cries, “Rabbouni.”

In the Mark story, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome visit the tomb. They find the stone rolled back and a young man who told them where to find Jesus. It says, "Terror and amazement seized them."

There have been many skeptics who questioned, "If the story is so important why couldn't two writers agree on how many people were there? And it is relatively easy to find discrepancies between gospel writers who tell the same story, but with differences in the setting of the story. In an in depth study of the resurrection, one can eventually see that the authors are not so much straining at relaying details as they are trying to convey meaning. The story of the resurrection is told so as to affect the reader, and particularly if the reader is reading the story several times.

So, let us assume that we today want more than just a cursory understanding of the resurrection, that we want the benefit of an in depth study.

The first thing we see in any account of the resurrection is that whoever came to the tomb was at first puzzled by the disappearance of Jesus' body. And that would be par for the course. Jesus had died. The followers of Jesus expected to find a body there. The second thing we see in these accounts is that whenever any of his followers finally realized that Jesus had risen, they were astonished. After astonishment, there was usually a time when Jesus appeared to his followers and recognition occurred. In the gospel of John, when Mary cried, "Rabbouni," recognition occurred. This was to indicate that something extraordinary had happened in the person who was recognizing Jesus.

Other examples of this recognition are recorded. Recall when Thomas, after doubting, came to a time of recognition, and said “My Lord and my God.” But it was more than recognition. Something happened in the person. There are many post resurrection appearances recorded in the gospels. And each time there is a sense that something beyond words is happening. This is certainly the case in Mary’s Raboni.

How could we describe what happened in those people? Mary had been there with the other followers. She knew of his teachings, his healings, his miracles. All of his followers had eaten with him, spent time with him. They had heard him say that he would be killed, but that he would rise again. But somehow it was not enough. Because in spite of all he had said to them, they mostly knew one thing, that he was dead.

And so, when Jesus appeared to a person after the resurrection, it set in motion the extraordinary. We can use our imagination to get a grasp of what could have gone on in Mary’s thinking: She knew that Jesus had died. And yet he was standing there before her. Those two perceptions ran headlong into each other in Mary. He had died. But he was standing before her.

For all of his followers, his teachings alone had not been enough. In the face of his death there is no mention that any of them anticipated that he would be risen. They needed one thing beyond their experience of Jesus, beyond his teachings, his miracles. His appearing to them after the resurrection was that one thing. It opened their eyes.

And perhaps in 2009 we, like Mary, need our eyes opened. Perhaps we who are soaked in bad news need a new awareness, a new uplifting.

Multiple choice question:

In 2009 would it be advisable to:

- (a) Realize that we who are steeped in bad news need a new awareness of victory in Jesus Christ? or
- (b) Just accept that Easter, like a lot of other things in religion, is unrealistically optimistic? or
- (c) Pretend we are celebrating Easter even when we know that real life is much darker.

For me, I would say "a."

When Jesus' followers found the empty tomb, all that they knew about his death was called into question. They needed a new awareness, a new way of seeing him.

That new way was when in their perception they moved from the teaching promising Jesus to Risen Lord. When he appeared to them as the risen Lord, he was the same Jesus that they had known and loved. But in his risenness he was distinctively different.

In the post resurrection appearances his followers learned that after conquering death they could still know him. So, when Mary cried "Raboni," within her it was the dawning of a new awareness. She recognized Jesus as her friend, her teacher, but also as Risen lord.

And that is the real celebration of Easter. This Son of God, this Jesus Christ, was sent to the earth to live among us, and to die among us. But in his rising to new life he conquered death. Even after this conquering we can know him as we know a friend.

Among Jesus' followers this knowledge was so wonderful that it led to the birth of the Church. In our own lives we cling to Jesus' teachings, and to the accounts of his miracles. But our eyes are truly opened when he appears in our lives like he appeared to Mary.

With the first century followers of Jesus, each experienced Jesus as risen depending on who they were. He appeared to them in their individual lives. He appears to us in our individual lives, in the Eucharist, in a prayer, in a conversation at work, and in a host of other ways. He appears to us as the one who was killed. But he also appears to us as the one who stands before us, the one whom death could not hold.

In this risen one who stands before us is the hope of the world. He has moved to conquer death and darkness in the past. And he still does. In him is the answer to how we deal with bad news. In him is how we deal with death and darkness across the board.

It is his way to move toward death and darkness in each of us and all of us in anticipation of conquering it. In the face of bad news, and in the face of good news, In Christ, each day is a new day, if we allow our eyes to be opened. In Christ we find life where there was death. We find hope where there was hopelessness. In our recognition of this Risen Christ in our own lives, we will share in his victory over death. His victory will be our victory. That is the true celebration of Easter.

May his teachings, the stories about him, the miracles, the healings, may they all be ours. And beyond that, may he appear in our lives as Risen Lord. May our eyes be opened. May recognition be ours. Christ the Lord is risen today. Amen.