

EASTERTIDE

Easter is the opening of the season of Eastertide. With the cry, “The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed”, the church celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The celebration of Christ’s resurrection continues for fifty days, commencing with Easter itself and concluding with the Day of Pentecost.

It is important to note that Easter is not the close of the Lenten season; it is the opening of the Easter season. Lent officially concludes at on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as the church keeps vigil, awaiting Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Easter – the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ – is the greatest and oldest celebration of the Christian Church, both in the Western (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) and Eastern (Orthodox, Coptic) traditions. The long preparation of Lent and the resulting forty-day celebration of the resurrection following Good Friday indicate the central importance of Easter. It – and not Christmas – is the most important celebration of the Christian year.

The church has celebrated Easter and Eastertide in many ways. In the earliest church, catechumens were baptized at the Easter Vigil (see “Easter Vigil” in the Holy Week section of this lectionary), joined the church and received their first holy communion. In the middle ages, the night before Easter was celebrated by the illumination of the churches awaiting the Day of Resurrection. In both the eastern churches and in many Reformation churches, the congregation would gather on Saturday night, as they waited for the dawn that would signal Christ’s resurrection. Picking up on the theme of awaiting the dawn, an Easter Sunrise Service was added to the church’s liturgy by the Moravians in the early eighteenth century, and that tradition spread across all of Christendom; however, it is not a part of the standard lectionary. If your church holds a Sunrise service and you want to choose scripture appropriate for that celebration, see the commentary on scriptures in the “Easter Vigil” portion of the lectionary, the Easter Sunday lectionary (which has additional lessons to be used for either a sunrise service or the regular service) or in the Easter Evening lectionary that follows. The liturgical color for Easter is white.

What is the derivation of the name, “Easter”? The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) stated that it comes from an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, “Eostre”. There is no doubt that, like Christmas, the church “baptized” a pagan spring fertility holiday, adapting it to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The remnants of that pagan holiday are reflected today in “Easter bunnies” and “Easter eggs” – both reminders of fertility.

Unlike Christmas, the date for Easter is movable. It is determined by the Pascal Full Moon (or the date of the full moon in the latter part of March or in early April). Thus, Easter will fall in any given year between March 21 and April 25.

Easter Sunday

(First Sunday of Eastertide)

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18 or Mark 16:1-8; Acts 10:34-43 or I Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18. The initial resurrection story in John is one of unfolding awareness of what God has done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The stage is set in the opening line of the narrative: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” (20:1a). That to which we will be exposed in the opening story of the resurrection (20:1-18) will be the movement from darkness through dawn to light, from resignation to curiosity to awareness of what God is doing, from closed-minded doubt to inquiry and then to firm belief as the Christian community becomes aware that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead!

The story begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb and discovering it is empty. She runs to the disciples with the message, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2b). The first step in the transformation of Jesus’ disciples is Mary’s conclusion that Jesus’ body had been stolen. That is the most logical conclusion for an empty tomb. But who are the “they” who took the body? The Jewish clerical aristocracy? The Romans? Grave robbers?

Peter and the “other disciple” (likely the unidentified “disciple whom Jesus loved” of John) race to the tomb. The other disciple wins the race, peers into the tomb but doesn’t enter. He notes “the linen wrappings lying there” (20:5). This is the second step from darkness to light. If it had been grave robbers who had invaded the tomb, the linen wrappings wouldn’t be lying there. Those wrappings, together with the myrrh and aloes in which they had been wrapped, would be far more valuable than the body itself. Grave robbers would have left the body and taken the spice-impregnated linen wrappings, or they would have taken the body with the wrappings! But no self-respecting grave robber would have taken the financially-worthless body and left the extremely expensive spice-impregnated lines. So, second, this disciple would have concluded that robbers had not invaded the tomb.

The text then tells us that Peter arrives, rushes into the tomb itself, and notices not only “the linen wrappings lying there, (but also) the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself” (20:6b-7). This, to both disciples, is extraordinary. The linen clothes are lying there almost like a cocoon – but the face cloth is lying off by itself, *neatly folded!* What is the significance of John’s specific noting of this arrangement of cloth?

The face cloth was placed over the face of the deceased before he or she was wrapped, so that as the body was wrapped, the face cloth would be held in place by the surrounding wrappings of the body and around the head (like a turban). If the Jewish rulers or Romans had removed the body, they would likely have taken it in the wrappings. If they hadn’t, they would have torn the body out of its wrappings (because their objective wouldn’t have been robbery of the valuable spices) and torn off the face cloth, tossing it into the pile of linen wrappings (as the final article to be removed). They wouldn’t have taken the time to remove it, neatly fold it, and place it aside from the other cloths.

The text tells us that the two disciples “saw and believed” (20:8). But it is careful to make clear that what they believed was not that Jesus had risen, because “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (20:9). What, then, did they believe? What they

believed was that Jesus' body could not have been taken by the chief priests or leaders of Israel nor by the Romans nor by grave robbers.

So the first step from darkness to light is the conclusion that Jesus' body was stolen. The second step is the determination that it was not grave-robbers who took the body. The third step is the realization that neither Israel's religious leaders nor the Romans had taken the body.

But if none of the "usual suspects" could have taken Jesus' body, where did his body go? What happened at the tomb? Mary, who obviously had returned to the tomb with Peter and the other disciple, remained behind at the tomb as they "returned to their homes" (20:10). Still curious and hoping for any clue that would unravel this mystery, Mary peeks into the tomb again – and is stunned by what she sees. Inside the tomb are "two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying" (20:12). They ask her why she is weeping.

Mary's reply to the angels is similar but not identical to her initial report to the disciples. She says, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (20:13, cf. 20:2). The difference in her two statements is one word. In her first statement to the disciples, she called Jesus "*the* Lord". In this statement to the angels, she calls Jesus "*my* Lord". She is moving from the objective to the subjective, from a distant relationship to personal commitment and loyalty, from doubt to faith.

She then turns and sees a man behind her. Perhaps *he* took the body! He asks her a question somewhat different from the angels: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking" (20:15)? This is the essential question throughout the Gospel of John – "Whom are you seeking?"

She supposes this man to be the gardener, and says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (20:15). Mary still cannot believe the unbelievable. If neither the Judean leadership nor the Romans nor grave robbers had taken Jesus' body, perhaps this gardener had. This is the fourth step!

Now comes the fifth step. "Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni" (20:16)! Jesus is alive! Jesus has risen from the dead! And here he is, directly speaking to Mary! And Mary is overwhelmed with joy and exultation (she even hugs him in verse 17). The light has dawned!

But the process is not yet complete. There is a sixth step. "Go to my brothers and tell them," Jesus instructs her. So Mary runs to the disciples to announce, "I have seen the Lord" (20:18)! The spread of the good news that "He is risen! He is risen indeed" to the disciples is given to a woman, just as the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans was entrusted to a woman (John 4:29). And resurrection life now pours into the Church!

Mark 16:1-8 is perhaps the most confusing account of the resurrection of Jesus that appears in the four gospels. In fact, it is no resurrection story at all, but rather an empty tomb story. It is quite similar to the stories that appear in the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John – except that no

resurrected Christ appears to the people at the tomb. Instead, Mark simply ends this story quite abruptly with the women who found the empty tomb, afraid to share what they have seen with anyone else. Why that is so, we will explore later in this exposition.

The close of the fifteenth chapter of Mark tells us that Jesus was buried in the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea. The tomb was described as a hole or cave within a rock wall, and it was sealed with a giant stone that was rolled in front of the doorway to the tomb and sealed shut. Mark's story then continues:

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:1-8).

That's it! That's the way the Gospel of Mark ends! It simply stops with the women running away from the tomb, frightened to say anything about what they had seen.

But what had they seen? They had not found the corpse of Jesus that they had expected to find (and to prepare for proper burial). But neither had they seen a resurrected Jesus. All they saw was an empty tomb and a man telling them that Jesus had “been raised” and was consequently “not here”. He intimated that Jesus was alive again because he said that he was “going ahead of (the disciples and Peter) to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he promised you.” But there was no actual Jesus. In the other gospels, Jesus met with the disciples, broke bread and ate with them, talked with them and taught them. But in Mark – there is no Jesus at all, only the rumor of a risen Jesus! What a strange way to end a Gospel!

Many have sought to make correction of such an abrupt ending. Although the most ancient manuscripts simply end at verse 8, other endings begin to make their appearance in the 2nd and 3rd Christian centuries. One has found its way into the KJV, RSV and NRSV as verses 9-20, but it is always bracketed to indicate that it is likely not an authentic ending of Mark. It is clearly built upon an integration of the other three gospel accounts. So it must be considered as spurious. Therefore, we are still left with a very abrupt ending to this Gospel.

There are two plausible explanations for the sudden ending of the Gospel of Mark. The first is that there was originally a much longer ending, similar to those written by Matthew, Luke and John – but that somehow it has gotten lost. Of course, that is pure conjecture. So, although one could consider the possibility, you can't build biblical study upon a supposed document you can't study.

The other explanation is that Mark meant to end his book as rapidly as he did, indeed, end it – that it ended precisely the way Mark intended to end it! But why would he do that? Why would he end his book with no ending at all?

Well, consider the theme of the Gospel of Mark. The genius of the book by Mark is its analysis and its acting out of power. The root of Israel's problem, Mark teaches, is its understanding of power (Mark 10:32-42). Both conservative and revolutionary, both Roman governor and Zealot, both Jewish priest and Pharisee understood power as domination, as control, as enforcement. But what if Godly power is something entirely different? What if true power is relational?

This is what Jesus is proposing in his radical statement to his disciples, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45).

The image of a servant captures the essence of authentic power, Jesus teaches. The image of the one “who gives his life as a ransom for many” captures the power of Jesus’ third way. Such a person who exercises servant power is “the man or woman for others”. This is Jesus’ “third way” – the radical solution that would keep the Jewish and Roman worlds from destroying each other.

But was Jesus right? Or was he a victim of his own delusions? The “realists” of Israel, whether of the Jewish or Roman persuasion, would say he was a dreamer, naïve, one who threw himself against the unyielding phalanx of Roman swords, high priests’ law codes, and a procurator’s cross.

So was the third way no way? Did the exercise of relational power reveal itself to be as useless as revolutionary power? For all his good intentions, had the radical rabbi lost? The most important portion of the eight final verses that conclude the Gospel of Mark is these words:

“As the women entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:5-7).

“He is going ahead of you to Galilee.” It is here that the Gospel of Mark comes to its abrupt end. But its end is, intentionally, no end at all! Mark doesn’t want his Gospel account to end! Jesus is going before Jesus’ followers – before the women to whom he appears as the only ones who stood faithfully beside him through his crucifixion, before the disciples who had fled in terror, before Peter who had denied him. He is going before all of them, back into Galilee, back to where the story first began, back to where it is always beginning afresh, back to where God’s people always keenly engaged Jesus.

We keep experiencing the *relational power of Jesus* – a power that could not be killed by even the greatest powers of Rome or Jewish high priests. As each person meets the resurrected Jesus

and comes into relationship with him, he is radicalized as Jesus was radicalized, he accepts the call to the third way of Jesus to change the world, its power structures and its abuse of power by practicing the power of the love that can confront and can call to a different political, economic and spiritual reality. As each person meets the resurrected Jesus and decides whether to accept Jesus' call to a radicalized faith and to act upon that faith, the new covenant community keeps on being recreated, and we follow Jesus into our "Galilees" as we each answer his ongoing call to discipleship. And as we follow him, then – and only then – is the Gospel of Mark completed as it is being lived out in our world!

Isaiah 25:6-9 is a message of hope and triumph over death to an embattled Israel. God will act to save his people, Isaiah prophesies. He will fill the people with abundance and joy, because "the shroud (of death) that is cast over all peoples" (vs. 7) will be removed and God "will swallow up death forever". Through his mighty act of liberation and redemption, God will wipe away all tears, sorrow and disgrace earned at the hands of those who persecuted Israel. All mourning, even death and the sting of death will be removed (vs. 8), for God will bring salvation to all the peoples of the earth.

St. Paul quotes this passage in I Corinthians 15:54 to support his argument for the resurrection of those who belong to Christ. Likewise, the author of Revelation quotes this passage in 7:17 to describe the shalom kingdom that God will build through Jesus Christ.

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24 is a song of victory, built around the opening and closing refrains, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (vss. 1, 29).

Psalms 118 was originally intended to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. The high priest calls the people to worship with the cry, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever". The term "steadfast love" is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means God's unconditional, "grace-filled" love that is totally loyal to us and which then expects of us comparable "loyal love". But whether we respond with such loyalty, God will remain committed to us because God has promised so to be toward us.

The psalm then describes a magnificent procession of king, priest and people (vss. 19-25) to the Temple. Once arriving at the temple court, the high priest then moves to the altar (vss. 26-28) to place upon it a cluster of branches (Lev. 23:40). The liturgy then ends with the entire people praising God through the words that were their call to worship and now becomes their benediction: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever"!

The overarching theme in the psalm, stated in many different ways throughout that hymn, is captured best in verse 14: "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation". Therefore "with the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me" (vs. 6)?

Portions of this psalm are among the best-known in the Psalter. They are meant to march in order with each other, with one inevitably following the other. "The stone that the builders

rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (vss. 22-24).

This Psalm reminds us that acting out his *chesedh* love, God takes that which is rejected or despised, "things (and people) who are not" and makes them "things (and people) who are." God takes the rejected and marginalized ones – even a prophet sacrificed on a cross and the peasants who hopefully followed him – and builds an entire shalom kingdom upon them. Such resurrection is something that engenders our praise, so that each day becomes a new resurrection day where God's great reversal can once again burst forth into human society!

Acts 10:34-43 is the sermon preached by Peter to Cornelius and his household upon his conversion to Christ and the baptism of his family. It expresses Peter's new understanding that God intends salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews, and thus signals the most profound breakthrough in earliest Christianity that converted it from being a Jewish sect to becoming a worldwide religion.

In this sermon, Peter proclaims that the gospel is to go to the Gentiles (vss. 34-36). He then summarizes that gospel in a confessional statement about Jesus (vss. 38-43) that includes a significant emphasis upon Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his appearance to those "who were chosen by God as witnesses" (vs. 41). Peter concludes the sermon by stating that the church, God's people, are now commanded by Christ to share this good news "to the people" throughout the world.

One of the most intriguing parts of the sermon is Peter's opening statement, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (vss. 34-35). The Greek phrase translated "shows no partiality" is literally "one who lifts faces", so that Peter is saying "I truly understand that God is the one who lifts faces". This is a reference to an ancient custom in the Near East in which, when one greeted or petitioned a superior, he would "bow" or "hang" his head in order to symbolize submission. If the superior lifted up the person's face so that the inferior could look the superior squarely in the eyes, that would be a sign that the superior had thoroughly accepted the inferior and was now favoring him.¹ Thus, what Peter is saying here, is that God "lifts the face" of anyone who comes to Him (as had Cornelius), beseeching to be accepted and forgiven. In every nation, there are those who have a receptive nature to God and want relationship with Him – and God will not ignore them!

I Corinthians 15:1-11 is the opening of a larger section of that book (15:1-58) dealing with Jesus' resurrection. It was obviously written by Paul to counteract those in and outside the Corinthian Church who were denying the resurrection. In essence what Paul is arguing is that one cannot deny the resurrection and still be a Christian (the meaning of "unless you have come to believe in vain" in vs. 2b).

¹ Examples of the action of "lifting the face" in scripture would be II Kings 3:14 and Lev. 19:15.

Paul begins his argument for the resurrection in an unusual way. He doesn't begin it either with logical argument or biblical exposition. Rather, he begins it with personal testimony.

Reminding them of the faith that had been proclaimed to them, that they embrace, and that now help shape their lives and mission (15:1-2), Paul summarizes what they have been taught. "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (15:3-4).

Paul then moves from confession of faith to an appeal to provable fact. He tells the reader that the resurrected Jesus first appeared to Peter, then to the twelve disciples, then to 500 believers, then to James (Jesus' brother and the titular head of the church), then to all the "apostles" (not the twelve disciples – because Paul has already referred to them – but to those additional people recognized by the church as having apostolic or foundational ministries, viz. I Cor. 1:1; Acts 14:14), then "as if to one untimely born, he appeared to me" (Paul). The reason why Paul provides this proof is that all these people were eyewitnesses that Jesus was alive. They had each seen Jesus "face to face", and most had touched him and talked with him. Because most of them were still alive (vs. 6), anyone could talk with any of them and corroborate that each had met with the resurrected Jesus. Further, because there had been so many people who had been with the resurrected Jesus (approximately 525 people) and at different times, Jesus' resurrection can't be explained away as mere hallucination, wishful thinking or mass hysteria. Paul rests his case in the integrity of people rather than the logic of argument (although he uses logic later on in this matter).

At this point, and because he has been under such relentless attack from the "parties" of the Corinthian Church, Paul can't resist the temptation to briefly divert from his argument to a little self-defense. He makes a deprecating remark about himself ("one untimely born") to point out that he, as an apostle, has been the last to meet with the resurrected Jesus face-to-face (Acts 9:1-9). In one sense, Paul states, he doesn't deserve to be considered an apostle "because I persecuted the church of God" (vs. 9). But in another sense, he does deserve to be so considered because God's mercy and forgiveness have been given to him, he has been called by God to be an apostle, and he has taken his apostleship more seriously than has any other apostle for "I worked harder than any of them" (vs. 10).

But then Paul suddenly recognizes that he has diverted from his argument (thus lessening its impact) and quickly reverses himself. He reminds both his readers and himself that God doesn't reward hard labor but whether we embrace God's grace, and then returns to his resurrection argument, "Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim Jesus' resurrection and so you have come to be believe" (15:11).

Paul has presented a strong argument here by reminding the church of the large number of eyewitnesses who saw, met and talked with the resurrected Christ. Yes, it is against all logic to believe that someone has risen from the dead. But the facts are otherwise, Paul argues. To deny Jesus' resurrection, you have to deny the fact that 525 people can testify to their actually being with an alive Jesus *after* his proven death. Because there are too many eyewitnesses to argue hallucination, and because Jesus' appearance was over a number of years and at too many occasions to argue mass hysteria, the only conclusion one can fairly draw is that Jesus is indeed

risen from the dead. Both Roman and Jewish courts require two eyewitnesses to corroborate a claim, Paul reminds his readers; the church has 525 eyewitnesses!

In a sense, what Paul has written here moves beyond an argument for the resurrection to a recital of faith. It is a proclamation of what the Church holds most dear. It is, in its way, a confession of faith. And therefore, it is also a statement of call. These 525 eyewitnesses didn't just happen to be standing idly around, having nothing better to do with their time. They had been selected beforehand by God to be eyewitnesses of their Savior's resurrection. This was, in part, why they had been both born and reborn – to be able to give witness to Jesus' resurrection. So, Paul declares, even though his mission has been to be the apostle of the Church to the Gentiles and plant churches throughout the Mediterranean world, in a very real sense, Paul has been called by God, and as one who was not a believer but rather a persecutor of the church, to meet Jesus on the road to Damascus, and thus change the world through the One who changed his world forever!

(Copyright © 2009 by Partners in Urban Transformation)
(Cycle B Oeaster Day.doc)