

APRIL 20TH, 2019: EASTER VIGIL

Genesis 22:1-18 Exodus 14:15-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Luke 24:1-12

(Ideally all nine readings should be proclaimed tonight. But because of space limitations, I can only comment on four.)

If we're determined to prove the historicity of Jesus' resurrection from the four gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb, we have an impossible task. There are so many contradictions within those four narratives that, taken together, no one can be certain about what exactly happened at the tomb on Easter Sunday morning.

Each of tonight's nine readings wasn't chosen for what it could prove, but for what it could help us understand about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. There are probably as many implications of that event as there are people who believe it took place. In many ways, we're free to look at it from any perspective we choose.

Early Christian communities frequently turned to tonight's Genesis and Exodus narratives of Abraham sacrificing Isaac and the Chosen People crossing the sea as ways to understand the resurrection's significance. Just as Yahweh delivered Isaac from death at the last second, so God also delivered Jesus of Nazareth. And just as the enslaved Israelites went from death to a new life at the Red Sea, so Jesus went from death to a new life by his dying and rising. In each situation, people expected death, but found life.

Yet as Deutero-Isaiah reminds us, one thing is consistent as they face their deaths: God's word. No biblical author emphasizes that word more than this unnamed prophet. Preaching during Israel's 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile, Yahweh's word is the prophet's only recourse. Few people believe him when he speaks about Yahweh freeing them and returning to the Promised Land. Such good news can only be a figment of his imagination. But over and over again he insists in the name of Yahweh, "My word shall not return to me void." Once God's word is spoken, it happens. Its effect is just as certain as the effect of the rain and snow.

One of our problems in experiencing that effect is that we simply don't notice it. Dealing with God is completely different from dealing with human beings. Deutero-Isaiah refers to this in his well-known passage describing the contrast between Yahweh's immanence and Yahweh's transcendence. "Seek Yahweh while he may be found, call him while he is near For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts." In the same instant, God is as close to us as the air we breathe and as distant as the furthest galaxy.

No wonder our sacred authors only tell their readers about Jesus' empty tomb and never attempt to describe his resurrection. That unique event is part of his transcendence. As Rudolf Bultmann observed, "How does one describe the 'other side' for people on 'this side?'" The evangelists can only talk about the effects, and those differ person to person. Luke, for instance, zeros in on the necessity of the death that precedes the resurrection. In tonight's pericope, the angels tell the women, "The Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified" It's not a matter of choice. It's the way God set things up.

Some in Luke's community were looking for loopholes to attain life, akin to the ways we learned in grade school – such as wearing a special medal around our necks or receiving communion on specific days of the month. Luke's angels assure us there are no shortcuts to dying with Jesus. Though there are a million ways to die, die we must.

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APRIL 28TH, 2019: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER
Acts 5:12-16 Revelation 1:8-11a, 12-13, 17-19 John 20:19-31

One of the reasons Luke composed a double volume gospel revolves around his belief that whatever Jesus does in the gospel, the Christian community also does in Acts. Though he doesn't directly employ Paul's image of the Body of Christ, he certainly shares his theology. It's up to us to continue Jesus' work. No matter what he accomplished during his earthly ministry, if we refuse to carry his ministry forward, it remains unfinished.

Only other Christs can pull that off. That's why we should be well-versed in both understanding and copying Jesus' personality. The second point is most important. As the late Fr. Dan Berrigan insisted, "Our task is to become Christians, not experts on Christianity." Luke constantly reminds his community that it isn't what we know but what we do. And based on today's first reading, one of the main things we do is heal, even going beyond just healing physically. That seems to be why Luke includes in his cures "those disturbed by unclean spirits." In the evangelist's day and age, unclean spirits were thought responsible for all evils, not just moral evils. For instance, those with mental problems were believed to have as many demons in them as someone afflicted with cancer.

Following that line of thought, John's Jesus, on the night of his resurrection, gifts his disciples with the Holy Spirit, enabling them to forgive one another's sins. Nothing rids us of our demons more than forgiving and being forgiven. Both help us create the kind of world the risen Jesus envisions.

Yet, as the author of Revelation states, unless we keep the risen Jesus as the "first and last" of our lives, we'll be trapped in our humdrum existence. Only he/she provides us the life for which we dream, as long as we remain participants and not just spectators.

One of the key elements in our participation can easily be overlooked – at least I overlooked it until recently. When John's Jesus reminds Thomas, "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed," we correctly include ourselves in that number. Yet at the same time, there's usually a group we leave out: our sacred authors. All scholars tell us that no one who physically came in contact with the historical Jesus ever wrote anything about him that we have today. None of our sacred authors – including the evangelists – directly heard or saw Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus who lived between 6 BCE and 30 CE. They, like we, encountered only the risen Jesus. Everything we read in our Christian Scriptures has come down to us from those who have not seen, yet believe. If they didn't pass on their second and third generation reflections to fourth and fifth generation Christians, we'd have no Christian Scriptures.

Obviously no one alive today has had an experience of the historical Jesus. Along with our sacred authors, we can only have contact with the risen Jesus. Though we might sluff off our risen Jesus experiences as insignificant, thankfully our Christian biblical writers didn't share that state of mind. Rembert Weakland, the former archbishop of Milwaukee, once wrote that all Christians have an obligation to put their risen Jesus experiences into a format others can later surface. The Spirit didn't share them with us for our benefit alone.

Hard to tell what that format would entail. (Weakland suggested that, given specific circumstances, it could simply be a letter to the editor of our local newspaper.) Though I imagine few of us will ever write a gospel, we should at least share our reflections with certain family members or close friends. Just as our sacred authors have helped us, we might be a help to others – people who we don't realize need them.

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