

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
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Confessing Our Faith
Isaiah 25.6-8 and John 20.1-18
Russ Dean, March 23, 2008

I continue to be amazed at the courage and the honesty of our scripture. The more I read, the more I am impressed at its quality. No where is this more evident to me than in the record of the resurrection of Jesus. Though I have made this point before, it bears repeating, especially as we seek to culminate a series on “confession” while simultaneously celebrating Easter.¹ It is like the strangely named “commencement” exercise, for though it marks the end of a season, the graduate is actually just beginning. When we come to Easter, we find that our confessions are not ended, but are, in fact the starting point of our faith.

If resurrection is the grand event that Christians have boldly claimed – the manifestation of the power of God to raise from the dead the one and only Christ – we might expect a more uniform and unequivocal presentation from the gospel writers. It’s the kind of event that you would expect to take the newspapers by storm with three-inch typeface: “Man Dead for Three Days Returns to Life – All Witnesses Confirm the Fact!” I think we can and should learn from a more careful reading, for the text is much more nuanced, perhaps even tentative in its presentation of the resurrection.²

Now don’t misunderstand me. Easter is the kind of world-changing event that makes three-inch headlines in the hearts of Jesus’ followers. There is no doubt about this. This is a fact,

¹ Our Lenten series was entitled “Confessions,” through which we considered a number of excuses or confessions which might keep us from being or becoming the people God calls us to be through faith. These sermons can be found at www.parkroadbaptist.org and include: “The devil made me do it,” “I didn’t understand,” and “I don’t want to change,” among others.

² My Easter sermon from 2006, “Make Up Your Bed (Christ is Risen!),” took a similar tack as regard the gospels’ presentation of the resurrection event, though the point of the sermon was quite different.

indeed. This should be our day of greatest celebration. Easter should call us to get out our Sunday-go-to-meeting best, put on a new Easter bonnet, and bring all the fanfare we can muster. For the Apostle Paul is correct: *without the resurrection of Jesus, our faith is in vain* (1 Corinthians 15.12-20).

I am simply asking you to read a little more carefully. To try to put aside what Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan call a “preunderstanding” of this story.³ That is, that neat and tidy picture we have such a tendency to create of our biblical narratives. It’s like the sentimental scene embedded firmly in our minds, complete with angels, shepherds, and wise men, all gathered around the manger – even though no one gospel has all of these characters in the story.⁴ It is that we know the stories, like the story of Jesus’ resurrection, so well, that sometimes we overlook the more interesting detail – and it is the details, nuances, sometimes subtle movements of the story that hold the most potential for our growth.

For example... The oldest manuscript of Mark ends with the women at the tomb, who, when they find it empty, run in fear – and tell no one (Mark 16.8). (It takes a later editor, probably embarrassed at such an inappropriate conclusion to the greatest ending ever told, to add appearance narratives to Mark’s gospel.)⁵ Matthew has Jesus appearing on the mountain to his

³ They make this observation in their book, *The Final Week*, which is a careful exposition of the final seven days of Jesus’ life, as viewed from the gospel of Mark (p.190).

⁴ The point here is not to call into question the so-called “facts” of the reports of scripture, but to point out that it is not specifically to prove them as facts that the writers include them. These “facts” are employed in the service of a particular writer’s deeper interest, namely, the theological message. So, there may (or may not) have been shepherds, magi, and angels at the manger, but this is neither the writers’ interest, nor mine. What was Matthew trying to teach his audience by telling the story through the eyes of Magi from the East? Why does Luke emphasize the shepherds’ story? Why does Mark not include a birth narrative at all?, etc... These are the important questions of scripture, when we take the individual gospel (or other text) as a unified whole – and the specific message of the writer is obscured, if not lost all together, when we “harmonize the gospels” and combine all of the elements into one uniform story.

⁵ Most modern translations now indicate this either in the text, or in a footnote to the text, though some translations make no mention of this at all. The King James Version, for example, gives no indication that the verses after the women’s flight from the tomb are not original (at least to the oldest manuscripts that are known to scholars). There

disciples – some of whom doubt his resurrection – even as they stand toe to toe with the risen Christ (Matthew 28.17). (I'm not making this up – it's in your Bible too, I promise!) And Luke repeats none of the same appearance stories as Mark or Matthew or John. (Wouldn't you think that the resurrection of Jesus would have produced at least one eyewitness account that would be verified by two different sources!? What does it mean that we have none of this in our celebration? I will return to this question.)

And when we come to John, we find Jesus' closest followers – clueless, even today. That we have walked with them, without understanding, to this point, confessing our shortcomings, should be no great surprise. But you'd think that by this point, at least they would have gotten it. The relationship of Jesus to Mary Magdalene has been the subject of intense speculation, but whatever it was no one denies that this relationship was unique. Yet when even this most intimate of Jesus' friends arrives at the tomb and finds the body gone – Mary has not even the first hint that anything of spiritual significance has taken place. "They have taken away my Lord..." she says. They? When Peter and "the disciple whom Jesus loved" arrive on the scene, the one doesn't even have the presence of mind to enter the tomb, and when the other disciple does so, he can only confirm Mary's fear.

Now, commentary after commentary sees his response as proof of his belief in resurrection. I hope I'm not just being stubborn, but I do not see this in the text, at all. John does say, "The other disciple... saw and believed." But what did he believe? The conclusion of the sentence makes it clear that all he believed in finding the tomb empty was Mary's clueless report, that someone, for some unknown reason, had in fact taken the body of Jesus. For John

is considerable dispute among scholars, and no one proposes a definitive solution to question such as: Did the original writer intend to end so abruptly at verse eight? Was his original ending lost? And even the majority of scholars who believe verses 9-20 were added later attest that they are still ancient. (The footnote in my Oxford Annotated Bible dates these verses around the middle of the second century, CE.)

says, “[he] saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” If he saw and believed resurrection – it would have been because he understood scripture. And if they had understood the scripture, John could have simply ended, “*He saw and believed.*” What other message could John be communicating? John’s text cannot mean the disciple saw the empty tomb and, therefore, believed in resurrection.⁶

Such belief did not happen that way the first Easter. It does not happen that way today. An empty tomb can be proof of only one thing, can engender only one belief, and this is the rather inconclusive observation that there is no body. And though resurrection is a life-changing reality to his disciples, the absence of a body does not prove this reality.

What I am saying is that if Jesus’ resurrection had been a truly public spectacle, and if the writers were intending only to convey the historicity of this event, surely our gospels would report this event in a more consistent and definitive way. And if you take the skeptic’s position, that the disciples simply made up this incredible story, you would have all the more reason to believe the writers would have worked in deceptive collusion, justifying and harmonizing their amazing story. This is, decidedly, not what our writers did.

So... what does it mean that we have none of this in our celebration? I think the lesson is too important to overlook. It means that our stories have the decisive mark of historical accuracy – but not accuracy in reporting Jesus’ actual rising. (There is no report of this.) Historical accuracy in the report of the disciples’ individual experience of the risen Christ. Every disciple

⁶ On numbers of occasions I have paused to make a point that may sound defensive. I make it again here, even given that risk. My interest is not to take a “liberal interpretation” for the sake of its shock value or novelty or simply to be liberal. I am as earnest as I know how to be in seeking to understand scripture, which I uphold with highest regard – yet my studies continue to inform what many would no doubt call a liberal interpretation. Again in this case, however, I believe the theological point is stronger when read in a non-literal way. If the empty tomb is not what engendered the disciples’ faith, then we are no less able to believe than were they – though separated by twenty centuries, we have the same access to the risen Lord as did Mary and Peter and the other disciple.

came to the tomb, or to the story of the tomb, or to an appearance of Jesus – individually. With doubt or faith. With disbelief or joy. With fear or in liberating freedom. We still do.

It is the only way we can know the risen Christ. And it is why theologian John MacQuarrie can make the controversial claim, “The disciples did not see the risen Christ that morning any more than we do now.”⁷ Resurrection is utterly real, when we open our eyes to the presence of Jesus – alive still among us. But this seeing begins in confession. Even Mary... even Peter... *even the disciple whom Jesus loved*... come to Easter Sunday with no clue what had happened, with no real belief. Mary even sees him and does not know him. So they begin, with many of us, even in our greatest celebration, by confessing: Forgive me, God, but I lost faith.

Craig Kocher tells it this way:

Courageous Mary stood at the foot of the suffering cross [alone]... She is the first to reach the tomb in the half-light of dawn, the first to weep over the body’s disappearance, and the first to proclaim the Risen Christ. Her grief is as acute as her love. [For Jesus had given] her a place in community, valued her gifts and contributions, and showed her purpose. Her weeping comes from the place of shattered dreams and a bleeding heart. Then Jesus calls her by name, holds her in his arms and restores her to the newness of life.

Many of these disciples, whose lives are in chaos, who are grieving the loss of a loved one, who desperately need to hear the Lord calling their name, will be in the pews on Sunday.⁸

So who are you? Who are you, who need to stand with Mary and Peter and the beloved disciple and say, “I haven’t a clue”? Who are you who need to confess, I have lost faith? Who are you who need desperately, even if you are not prepared to admit it, to hear him call your name and feel the warmth that touch of forgiveness and love? Who are you?

Whoever you are, whatever your story, whatever your confession – that confession is the beginning... but it is just the beginning. For God never gives up on us. Never. The undying love

⁷ This quotation comes from a collection of Easter quotations, for the purpose of preaching. I have no further citation.

⁸ This quotation is from Craig Kocher, in an online blog from the Christian Century.

of the resurrected Jesus, who came back for his disciples even after betrayal and disbelief, is our proof. And such love, God's love in our very midst, God's love in human touch, God's love spoken with a human voice, such love is the power that can transform our honest confessions of failure, into affirmation, confirmation, into a true Confession of Faith.

Mary's bold proclamation which closes today's text is a testament to the transformation that the risen Christ brings. And that the Church is still here, despite its many failings, speaking love, offering forgiveness, holding out hope – for me... for you... for the world – that the Church still manifests the love of Christ to this world enables me to speak Mary's Easter confession with her: *I have seen the Lord!*

Christ is risen!

Choir: Christ is risen!

Congregation: Christ is risen, indeed!

May it be so in our own confessions today!