

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

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Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

It must be discouraging for you. I am assuming that many of you don't keep up with formal, academic biblical studies. I am assuming that the *Da Vinci Code* may have caught some of you flat-footed. I imagine most of you have read the book or have friends and acquaintances who have. The movie will be out soon. The *Da Vinci Code* is a very simple book, not very well written (Stephen King has disparaged it in pretty strong language). But lots of people like it just because of that; and, it makes them feel smart. In one sitting, with no critical challenge and very little mental exertion, they feel that they have unraveled the mysteries of the ages, debunked Christianity and uncovered an ancient and malignant conspiracy all at once. Before *The Da Vinci Code*, most of you had probably never heard of the *Gospel of Mary* (Magdalene) or the *Gospel of Thomas*. These ancient "gospels"—and it is really a lie to call them "gospels"—and all the hype over them must be discouraging for some of you: to talk about being a Christian in a popular atmosphere that is so hostile, that suggests you are a moron to be a believer, a dupe for believing, must be unsettling.

And then we had these last couple of weeks. I always look forward to Easter, and part of the anticipation is to see what the popular press and magazines will do this year. I was not disappointed. In rapid succession, a prominent national paper published an op ed piece that said, outright, that Christians are irrational, bigoted, and foolish; a scientist made the papers and *NPR* with a report that in the incident reported in the Gospels, Jesus actually walked on ice on the Sea of Galilee, not water; the National Geographic released a TV special (with plenty of press) about the Gospel of Judas (another Gnostic text) that claims Judas and Jesus were best friends and Jesus actually put Judas up to the betrayal; and a *U.S. News and World Report* feature on a book by Professor James Tabor^[1] suggests that Christianity is nothing but a big misunderstanding: that Jesus actually *did* plan to re-establish David's royal line and to found a kingdom to defeat Rome. It seems like a lot for just a week or two. It must be a little discouraging.

I am not discouraged. I see all this as an opportunity for teaching. With the possible exception of ice on the Sea of Galilee, these are all old, discredited ideas. They are even bad ideas. The *Gospel of Judas*, like all those other Gnostic books, claim that there is a secret knowledge Jesus communicates to special people. He says to Judas, come over here and let me tell you a secret and that secret is then passed on by those "in the know" to others who are seeking higher spiritual knowledge. It sounds OK, except Christianity is not about secrets. It's all out there. It's very public. It is very plain. You don't have to know a particular handshake or a password to get what you need to know about Jesus.

The Gnostic gospels are also against matter—including physical bodies. Their point was that Jesus did not really rise from the dead in his body. He escaped the body so spirit could fly free. That sounds good to some, but it is clearly not Christian. According to the *Gospel of Judas*, Jesus invites Judas to betray him to death so that he, Jesus, will be free "from the man who clothes me". For the Gnostics the body is bad and matter is bad—the whole world is bad. Christians say, no. We believe in the resurrection of the body and in the goodness of the world, the created order, and that this world will be redeemed and renewed—physically, not just spiritually. The *Gospel of Judas* is not only anti-matter, it is anti-Semitic.

^[1] James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*.

And, before we get too eager for, say, the Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, we should consider that there, “Simon Peter” says, “Make Mary leave us, for females don’t deserve life”, to which “Jesus” says, “Look, I will guide her to make her male, so that she too may become a living spirit resembling you males. For every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven.” These secret, world-denying, anti-Semitic, anti-body, anti-woman writings—is there any surprise that Christians stopped copying down such things and passing them on? It was no conspiracy to suppress, it was simple disinterest that killed off the Gnostic Gospels that have come to light over the past century or so. I’ll write to you about some of these things in our newsletter. I trust your faith, your belief, your reason and compassion are strong enough not to be crushed by these very old, very bad ideas. But enough of this. “We are here today because we want to follow the real Jesus and seek the real kingdom in the real world.”^{2[2]}

Let us begin now again. Let us begin where we ought to begin, brothers and sisters in Christ, on Easter morning. “Christ is Risen!” To which your proper response as Christians (as we have rehearsed on Easters past) is, “He is risen, indeed!” This word and response are the whole of the Easter message, the central mystery and hope of our faith. This is the faith in which we (as Catholic theologian Hans Küng put it so well) “without strictly rational proof but certainly with completely reasonable trust, [rely] on the fact that the God of the beginning is also the God of the end.”^{3[3]}

I say again what I say every Easter: I hope that nothing I say today will take away from the power and truth of that simple proclamation: Christ is Risen! I intend to say nothing novel this morning.

Mark’s Gospel ends with the women fleeing the tomb “for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one for they were afraid.” It is a good place for us to start. Mark traveled with Paul, was a devout believer, and knew how the story turned out. So why didn’t he just write it?

One scholar said Mark must have died before he could write the last page of his Gospel. Another thought this Gospel must have been so unpopular in early churches that it was tossed on the bottom of the bookcase, inadvertently tearing off the last part of the scroll! As I said last week, it is a pretty stark little book.

I think Mark tells about Easter as he does because he wants us to join in the terror and the surprise of that moment, to be surprised again each time we read it. Remember the first words of Mark’s Gospel? The *Beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ. That is the title for his whole book.^{4[4]} The whole Gospel is just the “beginning” of the Good News. The resurrection, always known and powerfully present, is the “end,” the “goal,” and the embodiment of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus does not appear. The women find a remarkable young man, white-clad, who says, “Do not be alarmed.” Of course, they *are* alarmed, just as you or I would be. They flee trembling. “So they went out and ran from the tomb, distressed and terrified. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”

Mark was a young man. Perhaps he had an ironic worldview. His Gospel is terse, fast paced. There are surprises at every turn.

^{2[2]} N.T. Wright, sermon “As One Who Serves,” at the Maundy Thursday Eucharist with the Blessing of the Oils and the renewal of Vows, April 13, 2006, from www.ntwrightpage.com/sermons/Sermon_As_One_Who_Serves.htm

^{3[3]} Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976, p. 360

^{4[4]} From a conversation with the Rev. Clayton Blackstone, Pastor of Bangor’s Advent Christian Church.

Jesus was buried hurriedly in a borrowed tomb. The women set out for that place at first light on what we know as Easter. Suddenly they remember a big problem. *What about the stone?* They hadn't planned for that stone. It rolled easily into place, but it *sealed the tomb*, so it would be very hard to roll back; too hard for them.

All through Mark's Gospel, important things happen "along the way". This is another example. Mark always uses these movements to surprise us with exceptions to any predetermined outcome we might have in mind. So now, on the way, the women wonder, "Who will roll the stone away?" The obvious answer is *No one can roll the stone away*. Certainly they can't. But, when they arrive, the stone's been moved, the tomb is open. This is no longer the same story. Instead of the end, Mark gives us a beginning. He leaves the story hanging at its beginning—its real beginning. The angel commands the women: Go and tell. But what will happen remains to be seen.

So when *you* began, you were so much in love that nothing in the world could overcome the pure, wonderful, feeling you had. Then came what one with poetic insight has called the "gray disenchantment of years." You came to the doorway one day and were greeted with the knowledge, perhaps the actual words, "He is not here."

"He is not here" is not always good news. When a family member is destructively addicted, say to alcohol or drugs, how threatening it can be when that one, so terribly predictable for years, has changed for the better! As she gets better, the family gets more anxious. She was easier when she was addicted. They knew her then: how to handle her. They go just a little crazy when they come to the door of that addiction and someone says, "She is not here." She is better.

One of you held that baby—a new life ready to embrace all the good you wished for him. Then, one day, after the tears and heartbreak you couldn't even dream, you stopped and said, "Son, where have you gone? Where are you?" And terror seizes you because you have heard in your heart and mind that "He is not here."

It may have been your last visit. Eyes that once looked on you with tenderness now show no recognition at all. She is not here. She is gone; and I don't know where they have taken her.

Mark leaves us standing in our own place. Don't you see it? He also leaves us standing in the graveyard, where death should be, but where it may also be that death is not. Death should be there, but something else has happened. What is not clear just now, except that He is not here.

Mark speaks directly to those who stand in places like this. Places of seeming endings where one, by God's grace, can still dare hope for a beginning *instead* of an end. We stand where alienation and rudeness predominate in social contacts; where language is debased and people are debased; where technology and terror conspire to deny our humanity; where we can soberly fear for ourselves and our children.

Mark's beginning makes us ask the question—as those women did with trembling—"Can the resurrection happen?" Now this Gospel story is not about us; it is about Jesus. Yet, if we are in Christ, it is still in some way about us too. Isn't it? Mark is stark and basic.

Can the resurrected Christ invade loving and living? Can He invade our *particular* graveyard? Is there hope in Him beyond the vacant eye or angry glare? beyond distress, disease, addiction, love of wealth or of self or any of those other things we make the god of our lives? Can I, by the grace and through the person of this resurrected Jesus, be born again? born of water and the spirit? Can I with,

reasonable hope, trust the God who created the world and all that is in it, to still be God in the valley of the shadow. Can I reasonably trust the God of the beginning to be the God of the end?

I sometimes think all the desperate insistence on evidence of the resurrection might be designed, not to convert people to Jesus Christ, but to divert them from Him. The quest for proof provides a wonderfully respectable way to evade God. Sometimes it is easier and more comfortable just to die.

Trepidation grips us as we approach the graveyard where death in its many forms awaits us. We contemplate the great stones that separate us from what we long for most and the despair and hurt and anguish we know too well. And this is not a private faith. It is out there. It is no secret. It is public and it affects the whole, real world.

The rulers of this world are not bothered when yet another little group invents a new form of private spirituality. What makes Caesar shiver in his shoes is if people start to believe that whereas the Gentile rulers do it one way, God does it a different way, that there is a different way of power, a different form of rulership, and that Jesus has inaugurated and modeled it in his servanthood and suffering, and that the community that hails him as the only true Lord is going out into the world to live that way and to celebrate it, as we do today The Gentiles lord it over their subjects, it is not like that with us . . . we follow a Servant King, the one who brings rescue, healing and hope to the real world; that at the name of Jesus, David's enthroned son, every knee shall bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth.^{5[5]}

Mark never says what the women did after they fled the tomb. He knew Jesus was raised, but he wants us to be surprised, to remember ourselves, the Church, as the resurrection community which, over two millennia later, still greets this morning with: Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!"

The church invites everyone to join the witnesses who surround us like a great cloud, millions and millions across the world and across eons who say, "Yes. This can happen. It *has* happened. God raised Jesus Christ in our own human form from death. He is risen! Come, walk with us and see."

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

^{5[5]} N.T. Wright, sermon, op cit.