

ALLELUIA, CHRIST IS RISEN! – APRIL 13

Can't wait to say it with all of you, God willing. Until then, maybe there is something I can do to help us all have clearer thoughts and better understanding about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. I don't mean to try to actually explain that event, but I do think there are ways to talk about what the gospels tell us that are more faithful to the facts as we can determine them than others.

What has my attention tonight is the reading appointed for Monday of Easter week in the Episcopal Church lectionary, which is not usually read. It is a short passage from Matthew, chapter 28:9-15. What these six verses are concerned with are two very different facts about the resurrection story which were quite problematic at the time, and which have raised questions ever since:

1) Jesus appears as the Risen Lord to the women who have come to perform the usual burial rites for his mutilated dead body. It is hard for us to imagine what a challenge telling the resurrection story this way actually was. The problem here is that in those days women were not regarded as reliable witnesses—still, the gospel story preserves the truth even when to dress it up and “mansplain” it would have been the expected thing. After all, you want to make your case in the strongest way, right? So, the temptation not to be “embarrassed by the truth” was real, but the early community did not give in. We now understand this choice to tell the story saying women were the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection actually makes it all seem more likely to be true. Who would say it if it were NOT what happened?

2) the guards appointed to secure the tomb are bribed to say that the disciples (the men, presumably) have somehow unsealed the tomb and stolen Jesus' body.

Let's think on this. The text says the guards were stunned by the angel who opens the tomb. The chief priests are told by the guards that they failed in their assignment. Presumably they told their story in a way that left them blameless (we were surprised and overpowered by something mysterious and beyond our professional skill—they won't say it was their fault, right?). So the chief priests pay them not to repeat the “mysterious power” story, but to say that there had been a body-snatching--or maybe he was actually alive and was revived! It must have been a hefty bribe for those guards to let themselves look silly—because mysterious power stories start to sound like the chief priests had conspired with the Romans and killed the messiah after all. Uh-oh.

And, we are told, this body-snatching story has been told and passed around for years (Matthew's gospel was written half a century after the event).

The funny thing is, right down to the present day there are people who say that the women were hysterical at finding the body not there (who wouldn't be?) and thought they were seeing Jesus when, in fact, they must have seen a stranger or perhaps the women were at the wrong tomb altogether.

As for the missing body, the conspiracy thinkers carried that notion along to the present day. And there are even more outlandish notions. The DaVinci Code and The Passover Plot being two famous books in the last 50 years or so to exploit the idea that Jesus never really died.

What I find remarkable is that we have an incredible story, told with all the messy details left in, and it is those very same messy details that protect the truth from being swallowed up in "fake news". I say it is the messy, unlikely fact that Christians keep saying it was the women who were the first to see Jesus that helps make it all believable. And as for the idea that Jesus woke up and walked out of the tomb after being tortured and crucified, I hope it is enough to say that the men who did the crucifying were professionals in the work and they had an interest in seeing it well done. If things didn't go right, they'd be up there right beside whomever it was they were executing. I think we can trust that motivated professionals then did their work as well as they do now.