

Easter Reflection

Luke 24:13-35

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Prepared Text of Sermon

Last week another Easter – the highest Holy Day of the Christian Calendar, the culmination of the Season of Lent and the darkness of Holy Week. The day dawns and the faithful shout, “The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed.” The worship of Easter is magnificent; the music lifts one into ecstasy and the message of resurrection assures that when darkness has done its darkest deed, God acts to assure that in the end the evil foe is defeated, the agents of evil are vanquished and the final word is light not darkness, joy, not sadness, triumph, not defeat.

Why then would I rather preach on Palm Sunday than Easter; Maundy Thursday than Easter; Good Friday than Easter? This is in fact the case. I’ve been aware of it for several years. During those years I have loved our Easter worship – the liturgy, the music, the whole setting so fraught with spring –new life, new beginning expressed in the décor of the day. But the sermon; that has been the rub.

In a sermon entitled “The End Is Life,” Frederick Buechner refers to the Jewish leaders coming to Pilate to have a guard set at the Tomb lest the disciples come and steal the body. Pilate responds, go ahead – make it as secure as you can. Then Buechner raises the question “How do soldiers secure the world against a miracle?” And he continues, pointing to the fact that one can do a great deal in defense against miracles – and he points an accusing finger at preachers on Easter:

.... How does an old man keep the sun from rising? How do soldiers secure the world against miracle?

Yet maybe it is not as hard as they feared. I suspect that many of us could have greatly reassured them. I suspect that many of us could tell them that all in all there is a lot one can do in defense against miracle, and, unless I badly miss my guess, there are thousands upon thousands of ministers doing precisely that at any given instant – making it as secure as they can, that is, which is really quite secure indeed. The technique of the chief priests and the Pharisees was to seal the tomb with a boulder and then to post a troop of guards to keep watch over it; but even for its time that was crude. The point

is not to try to prevent the thing from happening – like trying to stop the wind with a machine gun – but, every time it happens, somehow to explain it away, to deflect it, defuse it, in one way or another to dispose of it. And there are at least as many ways of doing this as there are sermons preached on Easter Sunday. (Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, p. 77)

Those words have rattled me for a long time – that book of Buechner's sermons was published in 1966. Buechner was an ordained Presbyterian minister but, I think, never served a congregation or preached much at all. He was a writer and a great writer he is, stimulating as in this Easter sermon and as a good preacher should be –troubling!

Buechner illustrates what he means when he accuses preachers of Easter sermons deflecting or defusing the miracle of resurrection:

We can say that the story of the Resurrection means simply that the teachings of Jesus are immortal like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven and that their wisdom and truth will live on forever. Or we can say that the Resurrection means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he himself lives on among us, the way that Socrates does, for instance, in the good that he left behind him, in the lives of all who follow his great example. Or we can say that the language in which the Gospels describe the Resurrection of Jesus is the language of poetry and that, as such, it is not to be taken literally but as pointing to a truth more profound than the literal. Very often, I think, this is the way that the Bible is written, and I would point to some of the stories about the birth of Jesus, for instance, as examples; but in the case of the Resurrection, this simply does not apply because there really is no story about the Resurrection in the New Testament. Except in the most fragmentary way, it is simply proclaimed as a fact. *Christ is risen!* In fact, the very existence of the New Testament itself proclaims it. Unless something very real indeed took place on that strange, confused morning, there would be no New Testament, no Church, no Christianity. (p. 77f)

After seven years of pastoral ministry, four in Spring Lake and three in New Jersey, I left for Europe where I studied for four years at the University of Leiden in The Netherlands. I had considered graduate study when I was in Seminary but after four years of college and three years of seminary study – at age 25 – I was ready to realize my goal of becoming a pastor.

I was very conservative – an orthodox Reformed pastor. I was very serious and very insecure I now realize. I dotted the i's and crossed the t's; I was also defensive against any question raised to my orthodox Reformed theology. I didn't really understand that then but I have come to realize that the posture of certitude I displayed was a cover for a deep-seated fear that Christian faith as I understood it and believed it might not be able to withstand the assaults of modernity and the ongoing explosion of knowledge in all areas of human inquiry. If I remember

correctly, it was not a question whether or not my faith understanding was true; with all my being I believed it to be the truth based on Scriptural revelation and Reformed confessional interpretation. My hidden worry was that that truth might not prevail in the battle of opposing theologies, philosophies and modern science.

In reflection on those early years of ministry I now realize that I was really scared to death because, ironically, I was a good enough student to sense the very real challenges that were raised against my very narrow and parochial views. In other words, I “got” the questions even though I could hardly have let that fact arise in my consciousness.

Eventually the questions “got” me. After seven years of preaching and pastoral ministry, I finally arrived at the place where I no longer had answers for all the questions but began to discern the questions. It was time to face those questions by fulfilling the postponed adventure of further study and that in Europe where Professor Hendrikus Berkhof, theologian of the Hervormde Kerk on the faculty of the University of Leiden, took me on and became my mentor. For four years I read voraciously, took in lectures, sermons and had frequent appointments with Professor Berkhof, who, for me, was the perfect teacher and guide. A perfect teacher for me because he himself had gone through the very struggle to unite mind and heart that I was going through. I would raise my questions and he would say, “Ja, Ja, that is the question,” whereas what I wanted was the answer. Those were marvelous years of intense theological, biblical struggle with the Christian faith.

Barth and Bultmann were still the leading lights of European theological scholarship along with a growing host of colleagues. Berkhof assigned me Barth’s *Dogmatics, Vol. I, 2 – The Doctrine of the Word of God* – this was the second half of Volume I consisting of a mere 854 pages. I had been given the impression at Western Theological Seminary during my sojourn there in the late 50’s that Barth was suspect; we did not read Barth. But now, as I did so, I was amazed. Not only was he the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, he was affirming the orthodox faith in which I had been raised and educated and had preached.

For example, regarding the resurrection about which we are inquiring today, Barth speaks of it as the miracle at the end of Jesus’ presence in history as the Incarnate God. At the beginning, the miracle of the virgin birth indicating Jesus was not the product of human capability. He was *in* history but did not arise *out of* history. And at the end, the miracle of resurrection, the empty tomb, the sign that death was overcome. These are Barth’s own words:

Now it is no accident that for us the Virgin birth is paralleled by the miracle of which the Easter witness speaks, the miracle of the empty tomb. These two miracles belong together. They constitute, as it were, a single sign, the special function of which, compared with other signs and wonders of the New Testament witness, is to describe and mark out the existence of Jesus Christ, amid the many

other existences in human history, as that human historical existence in which God is Himself, God is alone, God is directly the Subject, the temporal reality of which is not only called forth, created, conditioned and supported by the eternal reality of God, but is identical with it. The Virgin birth at the opening and the empty tomb at the close of Jesus' life bear witness that this life is a fact marked off from all the rest of human life, and marked off in the first instance, not by our understanding or our interpretation, but by itself. Marked off in regard to its origin: it is free of the arbitrariness which underlies all our existences. And marked off in regard to its goal: it is victorious over the death to which we are all liable. Only within these limits is it what it is and is it correctly understood, as the mystery of the revelation of God. It is to that mystery that these limits point – he who ignores them or wishes them away must see to it that he is not thinking of something quite different from this....

The mutual relationship between these two limits may perhaps be defined thus. The Virgin birth denotes particularly the mystery of revelation. It denotes the fact that God stands at the start where real revelation takes place – God and not the arbitrary cleverness, capability, or piety of man. In Jesus Christ God comes forth out of the profound hiddenness of His divinity in order to act as God among us and upon us. That is revealed and made visible to us in the sign of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, but it is grounded upon the fact signified by the Virgin birth, that here in this Jesus God Himself has really come down and concealed Himself in humanity. It is because He was veiled here that He could and had to unveil Himself as He did at Easter. The empty tomb, on the other hand, denotes particularly the revelation of the mystery.... That God Himself in His complete majesty was one with us, as the Virgin birth indicates, is verified in what the empty tomb indicates, that here in this Jesus the living God has spoken to us men in accents we cannot fail to hear. Because He has unveiled Himself here as the One He is, we may and must say what the Christmas messages says, that unto you is born this day the Saviour. The mystery at the beginning is the basis of the mystery at the end; and by the mystery of the end the mystery of the beginning becomes active and knowable. And since this is so, the same objective content is signified in the one case by the miracle of the Virgin birth, in the other by the miracle of the empty tomb.... (*Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Vol 1*).

This is what I had always believed. The master theologian of the century affirming the objective, literal reality of the Virgin birth and the bodily resurrection that left the tomb empty.

One might suspect that my faith journey would have been satisfied with this brilliant scholar affirming my own faith understanding from childhood through long years of education and orthodox preaching. Strangely that did not turn out to be the case. At that point in my experience it was no longer enough to say, "The Bible says...." I was

quite surprised myself but I began to question Barth's bold claim of biblical teaching as the Word of God not to be questioned.

As I continued my study I was guided by Berkhof to a movement of young scholars who had been the students of Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. As happens repeatedly, in the course of historical development, whether in religion or politics or the broader cultural milieu, there is action and reaction. Questions addressed by one generation leave unanswered questions struggled with by a previous generation. I came to realize how the "climate of opinion" of a period has much to do with the issues addressed and the manner of that address. I was beginning to see that the strong reaction of Karl Barth to nineteenth century liberalism was precisely that – a strong reaction.

In order to put Barth's Neo-Orthodox movement in context, we need to understand that against which he reacted. In the compass of this paper it is not possible to do justice to the whole development of the Age of Reason or the Enlightenment. It is a period beginning in the seventeenth century but usually identified with the eighteenth century. It was a period in which human reason was understood as the primary source for ascertaining truth and the only legitimate court of appeal for authority. The dogmatic structure of the Christian faith based on divine revelation contained in the Bible was called in question. The foundations were shaking. The old supernaturalism was under serious threat.

Into such a context Frederick Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834) was born and into which he emerged as a leading theological voice and is recognized as the father of liberalism. It was his recognition of the serious intellectual challenge faced by Christian theology that Schleiermacher felt compelled to find another foundation for religion. The intellectual climate of opinion was allied against supernaturally inspired doctrines and was moving orthodox Christian theology towards the periphery of intellectual and social life. Schleiermacher sought a new foundation for religion in human experience, in an innate awareness of God. He found the ground of religion in human feeling, in the feeling of absolute dependence.

For Schleiermacher, then, and 'knowledge' in religion, in an intellectual sense, could only be a reflection upon the conscious feelings of relationship to the divine, not a description or analysis directly of the divine *per se* (but, as we saw in Section 1, pp. 36ff., neither were the feelings those of the self *per se*, in isolation from what is other). Schleiermacher was among the first to realize that theology defeats its own purpose if it speaks of God as if he were simply another 'object', distinguished from other 'objects' only by being 'greater' and 'removed from' the finite world. Such a 'God' is less than the truly Infinite One present in and to the whole universe. Such a view of God, says Schleiermacher, 'as one single being outside of the world and behind the world is not the beginning and the end of religion'. True religion is not this – or any other – *idea* but 'immediate consciousness of the Deity as he is found

in ourselves and in the world.' It is the immediate consciousness which is the material upon which theology works directly. This is the basic tenet of Schleiermacher which has drawn the later neo-orthodox fire, charging that he has substituted human feelings, human religiosity, human psychology and subjectivity for the proper subject-matter of theology, namely God's divinity and purpose as self-revealed in his Word. Again, the charge must be set against the evidence that Schleiermacher was interested in the 'emotions' precisely because they did point beyond themselves to the reality which had stimulated them.

(Keith W. Clements, *Freidrich Schleiermacher, Pioneer of Modern Theology*, p. 44f)

There you have it – the “climate of opinion” that moved Schleiermacher to seek a new foundation for human religion because he saw the old foundation washing away – a foundation of revelational truth in the Bible and the dogmatic structure of Christian theology – and in quite another “climate of opinion” – a Europe in shambles post-World War I sensing the bankruptcy of nineteenth century liberalism ripe for “a Word from the Lord”!

As indicated above, Professor Berkhof pointed me to a circle of scholars, some the former students of Karl Barth, who were no longer satisfied, as I found I was not, with the denial of the Enlightenment challenge to the dogmatic claim of supernatural revelation in the Bible along with the refusal to investigate the historical roots of scripture. The critical study of scripture arose in the eighteenth century and became a significant discipline in the nineteenth century but Barth turned his back on it. But his students re-visited those questions. To claim God visited our historical scene but to refuse to seek verification for that “sojourn in the human” did not satisfy this movement of younger scholars.

The reason I am going into all of this is that the focus of this investigation of historical verification was Jesus' resurrection.

Given his historical context – his moment in the unfolding of the human story, Karl Barth had a word that resonated deeply with his contemporaries. But Schleiermacher had not imagined a crisis of Christian faith in the nineteenth century. Another great Christian scholar had addressed the Christian tradition in light of the rise of historical thinking in the nineteenth century. Ernst Troeltsch did major work in addressing the question of the historical claims of Christian faith – that whole discussion I cannot go into here except to underscore my point that real questions do not go away if they are legitimate questions. After the Barthian clearing of the decks of such questions they reappeared because they were real questions.

The young scholar that spoke to me was Wolfhart Pannenberg. I will not attempt to set forth his theology of history here. It is complex and impressive. In sum, he

sought to give historical verification, to the extent that is possible, for the resurrection of Jesus. He was close to Barth in his conclusion but only after placing the resurrection in a full historical tradition. It was on such theological puzzles that I was beginning to write when I left Europe and took up my ministry once again in Spring Lake.

And it was out of all that theological wrestling that I began to preach and, indeed, preached for years. But I had not arrived. I was definitely a work in progress. I do remember early on in my preaching and teaching saying, "Give me Jesus and the resurrection and all else is negotiable." That gave me a message for those years of my return to preaching.

I was ready for the third quest of the historical Jesus. I haven't referred to the Quest of the Historical Jesus in the nineteenth century but there was a serious address of this matter with lives of Jesus published, each trying to recover the historical figure in his context. Without filling in that chapter I will only refer to what is sometimes called the Third Quest. The second was occurring while I was in Europe in the late 60's but did not become the catalyst for a major movement. But in 1991 John Dominic Crossan produced a serious and ambitious study entitled *The Historical Jesus – The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. That subtitle speaks volumes and Crossan delivers on the subject.

In 1987 another Jesus scholar, Marcus Borg, published *Jesus – A New Vision*. Again the subtitle gives the clue to the contents: *Spirit, Culture and the Life of Discipleship*. In 1994 he published *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* which became widely popular. Crossan could not believe his dense scholarly treatment should have become a bestseller which was also the case with Borg whose works are scholarly but carry a pastoral/spiritual tone along with the research. Both scholars were part of a group called the Jesus Seminar. I will not delineate the work of Crossan, Borg and others here but only indicate that here was a fresh approach in our time to locate Jesus in his social, cultural, political context. I received these studies with great profit. On the basis of my earlier contention that there is in any historical period a "climate of opinion" I would add that that is also the case in our individual lives; there are times and periods when our heart and mind are open to movement, when we sense a hunger, a yearning for something more as we encounter the vicissitudes of our life journey. At any rate this was true in my case.

My European study had continued to ground my preaching. In the years following my return to the Church in 1971 I kept reading and reflecting and when one is engaged in weekly preaching and teaching, constant reading, reflection and writing are demanded of one. I cannot now trace precisely how my focus on and understanding of Jesus developed but I know I was becoming more fascinated by the life of Jesus than in the early creedal dogmatic delineation of the risen Christ of faith. In my file I have a sermon of April 15, 1984 entitled "Jesus You are Really Something". The gist of that sermon is acknowledgment that to that point in my life,

my spiritual hero was Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose following of the way of Jesus led him to oppose Hitler and National Socialism, for which he paid with his life just before the end of World War II on April 8, 1945, at the prison camp at Flossenburg. April 15, 1984, was Palm Sunday and my text was from Luke 19:41 – “when he beheld the city, he wept over it.”

Looking back over the years I realize something was at work in me. Jesus, the human being, was coming alive for me in the context of his historical period. Here was one who had spoken truth to power and for that reason was crucified. As Dominic Crossan declares, at the communion table where there is bread symbolizing body and cup symbolizing blood, body and blood are separated pointing to violent death. Jesus did not die of old age, peacefully in his bed.

Something was germinating in me in the 80's which was ready to spring into flower in the 90's. Scholars, especially Crossan and Borg, put Jesus in context for me such that I saw the heroism of Bonhoeffer as replicating the way of Jesus, which of course meant that, for me, Jesus now becomes the great exemplar of human life before the face of God, full of love and grace and compassion with the courage to live out his vision faithfully.

Palm Sundays seem to be critical points in my own development. It was April 4, 1993, Palm Sunday, that my sermon was entitled “Jesus Died Because of Our Sins, Not For Them”. Not surprisingly, the text was Luke's Palm Sunday account – once again, Jesus weeping over Jerusalem. This was a radical claim. I was transforming the cross of Jesus from a place of atonement where Jesus' death was a bearing of the sin of the world to procure salvation for the world to a place of crucifixion where the political and religious establishment powers were killing one who became a threat to law and order, one who in the best prophetic tradition of Israel spoke his truth, his vision of the Kingdom of God.

This Jesus moved me deeply. It was this Jesus I wanted to emulate. It was this Jesus I could love with my whole being. This weeping one, this bleeding one. This one who, in his anguish prayed, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they are doing.”

This Jesus who experienced the darkness of crushed dreams, feeling abandoned, crying, “My God, why...?”

This Jesus who finally committed his cause, himself, to God, “Father, into Thy hands I commit my spirit,” entrusting himself, his cause, his whole being to God whom he called Father.

As for Frederick Beuchner with whom I began, whose accusation that so many preachers defuse the miracle of Easter in their Easter sermons, I can only say I don't really know about an empty tomb and I don't really care to spend time and energy trying to prove the historicity of the resurrection. There are differing accounts of

Easter in the four Gospels and Paul, and one cannot really harmonize them. Volumes have been written on this biblical puzzle and it really doesn't interest me. For me it is enough to believe he arose into the Mystery we name God and he lives because he continues to appear to those whose lives are transformed in that encounter.

Perhaps my favorite Easter story is the Emmaus Road encounter. Jesus overtakes two disciples on their way home from Jerusalem, dejected and full of despair. He joins them on the way but they do not recognize him. He speaks to them of their scriptures and when they reach the village they invite him to join them in their home. The table is set and then the guest becomes the host. He took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. "Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight." They returned to Jerusalem, found the disciples and others gathered declaring, "The Lord has risen indeed..." and the two Emmaus pilgrims told their story, telling the group "how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread."

This is how Crossan describes that encounter recorded by Luke:

The metaphoric condensation of the first years of early Christian thought and practice into one parabolic afternoon.

Emmaeus never happened.

Emmaeus always happens.

(*A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 197)

That, Rev. Beuchner, is the best I can do. And for me it is enough for He lives and continues to be the agent of human personal and social transformation. The Lord is risen indeed!

References

Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol.I.1: The Doctrine of the Word of God*.

John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994.

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