

Jesus in a Reverse Angle Lens

From *Credo*: A Series For Eastertide

Text: Acts 2:32, 36; Mark 10:18

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Eastertide, April 17, 1994

Transcription of the spoken sermon

"This Jesus, God raised up..." Acts 2:32

"... God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." Acts 2:36

"Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good?' No one is good but God alone." Mark 10:18

"*Credo*," "I believe." It is a Latin word, which takes to itself its subject and gives expression to the experience of faith, faith not in a proposition or even a person, but rather faith as trust in someone. That is the nature of faith as it has come to expression in the Christian tradition, as it has been experienced in the Christian tradition, I believe.

Last week I tried to distinguish between a set of beliefs, such as we have in a creedal formulation, and the *experience* of faith. I felt that many of you said, "yes" to what was said last week and felt that distinction was meaningful. While the content of our faith is not unimportant, for it is that upon which we reflect and it gives us that which we can teach and pass along, what we really long for is the experience of faith.

This week I picked up a little volume by a New Testament scholar whom I have mentioned from time to time. His name is Marcus Borg. He is a part of the Jesus Seminar, which is getting so much publicity these days in news reports, magazines, and newspapers. Borg had written an earlier book, *Jesus, A New Vision*, which was very helpful to me and to some of our thinking a year or two ago during the Eastertide season or Lenten season. But in this more recent book entitled *Meeting Jesus Again For The First Time*, he tells his own spiritual autobiography. It is often easier to get our heads around a story than it is a series of propositions, and Marcus Borg tells about his own story growing up in the church in the Midwest, a good Lutheran boy. He speaks of the hymns, Sunday school, all of those things. Then adolescence, some doubts, college, and a little time off from church. But then seminary, and the critical studies of the gospel. In

those studies comes the recognition that the gospels did not simply give us a news journalist's account of Jesus. They didn't give us a photograph; rather they gave us a portrait, or in his word, "a sketch," of Jesus.

Borg came to see that the gospels were faith documents. They were theological documents, which not only remembered the historical Jesus but also reflected upon the transformation of the community's understanding of Jesus after Easter. That experience of the Christian community after Easter was the transforming experience where the crucified one was experienced as living. That experience of the crucified one living caused them to look back on the life they remembered, and the life they remembered became colored through the experience of Easter.

His account of his own history is preferred when he was asked by an Episcopal men's Bible study group to talk to them about Jesus and the word was "make it personal". Sounds like what some of you might say to me when you say, preach to me and make it personal. Borg tells about making a little note to himself, "me and Jesus". It causes him to reflect on his own pilgrimage.

The thing he began to see is that there was a moment in his life when he moved out of faith, as it were. There was a time when he intellectually could not believe anymore even though he kept studying all the stuff. But then there was a time in his life when he came to a kind of spiritual experience, a mystical experience almost, a sense of awe, of wonder – the kind of spiritual experience that is described by not only Christian people, but Jewish people, and really cross-culturally, and even across the generations. The kind of "aha" moment, when it is as though the heavens open and one is encountered by, well let us say, God.

After that experience, that encounter, that kind of mystical experience, he returned to his study of the gospels and he began to see a new image of Jesus. What he had learned to that point in his critical studies of the gospels, the things that we talk about here all the time, the fact that there was a pre-Easter Jesus, that very human individual who lived and walked and ate with his disciples and talked to multitudes, and a very concrete, historical person, the Jesus that the church remembered the Jesus that is spoken about in the gospels. But he had come to see also that post-Easter Jesus or the Christ of faith, the Jesus who, after Easter, in the reflection of the community, took on more and more awesome character – a process after Easter that moved this Nazarine Jew, Jesus, through the lens of Easter into Jesus Christ. This Jesus, eventually in the fourth century, is spoken of as true God, true man, of one nature with God. This post-Easter process eventuated in the understanding of the Trinitarian God: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

Borg's new image of Jesus was a man who was filled with the spirit, who was a bearer of the spirit, a mediator of the spirit, one of those persons who seems so transparent to God that his very being and presence seems to radiate God, God's Spirit.

Marcus Borg, who had believed naively in the Jesus of, "Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so," Marcus Borg, who had gone through the critical fires of examinations, scholarly study and had been impressed with Jesus as a social, political figure but who couldn't do anything with all of the Jesus/God talk, suddenly through his own spiritual experience came to see Jesus as a person who was a bearer of the spirit, a spirit person, as he says. And as he speaks about Jesus at this point in his scholarly and professional life, it's obvious that there's another layer. This man has also encountered Jesus as the One who is the bearer of the spirit of God and who points to God, God who is spirit.

I tell you that story because it's rather interesting to me that last week we spoke about that distinction between having a set of beliefs, and the experience of belief; then I come across this Jesus Seminar scholar who likewise has all of the scholarly understanding of the critical study of the gospel, but now points also to an experience, an awakening, a new awareness, and sees Jesus as one of those people who was filled with God's spirit and mediated God's spirit, to those who followed him, and who continued to be present to them. And that, Borg says, is what Easter is all about.

Easter is about the fact that the One who is crucified was found by his followers yet to be with them, still to be powerfully with them, or as Dominic Crossan says: (I don't know if this is true or not but it makes a lot of sense to me.) You know there were followers of the kingdom movement, followers of Jesus up in Galilee who didn't know what happened down in Jerusalem. I mean you take the transportation, the communications, and that kind of thing – it wasn't like you could tune into CNN and find out that at three o'clock in the afternoon Jesus of Nazarus was crucified outside of the city. Crossan said, No, these followers of the Jesus movement were talking about Jesus, and God, and doing the miracles, and the healings, and all of these things. The movement was still moving. And suddenly they realized when someone came up north and told them, "Jesus is dead." "Well, when did he die?" "A month ago." Oh, no, they respond. It can't be, because nothing happened on that day. We kept on moving. The movement kept moving. Jesus the power, the spirit, everything is the same. It didn't end.

And Dominic Crossan said Easter, was simply the realization of Jesus' followers that he could not be dead but must somehow be present with them. Because the very same spiritual power and presence of God that he seemed to mediate in his life was still being mediated to them. They knew Jesus, they knew spirit, they knew God in the same way they had known and experienced God and Spirit when they were breaking bread with Jesus in the flesh.

"So what!" you say to me. Well, I'll just tell you how it helps me, It helps me to make some sense of the gospels themselves. In the gospels, just take the gospel according to Mark for example, three specific times Jesus says to his disciples, he was going to go to Jerusalem, he was going to die, and was going to rise on the third day. I think there are three times in the gospel of Mark where it says that.

Well you read that and you say, "Well, obviously Jesus was God, Jesus knew everything, Jesus knew what was going to happen." Now you come to Gethsemane, and there you have Jesus pleading with God to take the cup from him. And then you go to the cross and you have Jesus saying, "My God, My God, Why?" And you have the disciples full of fear, hightailing it for Galilee. Now I mean, they may have been dull, but can you tell me if this impressive teacher sat you down on three different occasions and said to you, "Look, we're going to Jerusalem. I'm going to die. I'm going to rise again the third day", would you have been acting as though what happened was devastating and made no sense to you? You see, those kinds of things cause those who really study in depth to say, "Something doesn't fit."

Or for example, the text of the morning: A young ruler comes to Jesus and he says, "What must I do to have eternal life, good Master?" Jesus said, "Why do you call me good?" Now it might seem Jesus was calling him up short saying, "Come on, get off it, get real." But as a matter of fact Jesus is really saying "There's only one good and that is God."

I hear that as saying Jesus distanced himself from God in his human nature and his human consciousness. I think it clearly means Jesus never presumed to be God. "Good Master, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good? There is only one good, that's God." How does such a saying still remain in Mark?

Matthew's got a story, Mark a story, Luke a story, John a story, and sometimes there's some stuff that was so much a part of the tradition that it got into the written record even though it really seems to be at war with some other things that were in the written record.

Now Mark is the earliest gospel written, we believe. And so he is probably recording close to the actual words just like it was there. Only one is good, that's God. But that created a real problem for Matthew. Matthew's dependent upon Mark's written record and he's got the same story. But listen to Matthew's version, written after Mark. In Matthew, someone came to Jesus and said, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" No problem in Matthew's gospel. The guy says, "What good thing must I do?" Jesus said, "Why do you ask me about what is good?"

Now the original story in Mark is Jesus saying, "Why do you call me good, God is good." Matthew doesn't want to communicate that. Now here Matthew garbles Mark's story because Matthew knows that that little story is going to cause some confusion. Someone's going to say, "what do you mean?" Jesus, Son of God saying here only one is good, that is God. We have to face honestly what is happening here.

When I really study these things, there is all kinds of stuff like that. So when I see someone like Borg working through, distinguishing between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus and acknowledging or understanding that through the event of Easter, the pre-Easter Jesus took on a different coloring, that helps me. Now I can understand. I can see the process. Example: In the book of Acts, on the day of Pentecost (that we read a moment ago), Peter's sermon concludes with the thirty-sixth verse: "Therefore, let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." God has made this crucified Jesus Lord and Christ or Messiah.

It would seem that through the crucifixion and the resurrection Jesus became by God's designation, Lord, (the honorific title of the Hellenistic Greek world) and Christ, the one the Jews were looking for. But if you go to the next chapter, the New Testament scholar, J.A.T. Robinson, points out that after the healing of the lame man at the temple, Peter's speech there seems to reflect a little different conception.

In the third chapter, the nineteenth verse: "Repent, therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord and that he may send the Messiah, appointed for you. That is Jesus, who must remain in heaven until the time of universal restoration that God announced long ago through the holy prophets."

Here it would seem that Jesus has been appointed by God to be the Messiah but he has not yet come as the Messiah. He cannot come as Messiah until Israel repents. And so the call, the appeal, here in this speech of Peter is repent. If you'll repent this Jesus whom God has appointed Christ will come and there will be the universal restoration of all things. There will be Shalom on earth.

Well, why wouldn't that be a natural kind of understanding? That's probably reflective of what they sensed from Jesus himself. Jesus didn't go around spouting the fact that he was the Messiah. Jesus was preparing the way for the coming of the Kingdom of God, which he believed, along with all of his contemporaries, was just around the corner.

Now I say it helps me to make sense of this stuff. I can see the process at work. I can see that they were struggling as much then as I struggle now to make sense of all this business. And so what I see as I approach the story of Jesus after Easter is that I have in the New Testament a memory of the historical Jesus, the Nazarene, the man reflected through the lens of Easter.

I call the sermon, "Jesus In A Reverse Angle Lens." It's the wrong season. It should be pro-football season, particularly when they do the instant replay. I don't know the technology of a reverse angle lens but you know how it goes. The quarterback throws the ball and the tight end goes down, and he catches the ball, and his foot comes down. Is it on the line, or over the line? Are both feet in or only one? In the replay they're able to show the ball caught. And then you see the

ball going back, eventually, to the quarterback whose arm starts here and eventually goes back here. And if you follow the reverse angle long enough you get to where he's taking the ball from the center. I don't understand that technology *but it is looking at the end event and trying to understand it by going back and watching the process*. Now that's what we have in the gospel records of Jesus. There is a memory of the historical Jesus plus the experience of the post-Easter community of the presence of the risen Christ.

Finally, what difference does that make? That enables me still to believe in Jesus. I can see him now as my brother who was filled with the Spirit of God, who was a bearer of the Spirit, who was so potently the bearer of the Spirit that those who met him experienced God. And following his death they continued to experience him alive as the bearer of God to them. Therefore, they began to speak of him with grand titles and to exalt him higher, and higher, and higher, into the whole creedal tradition of the church. As a matter of fact, he was God's man in whose face I see God and meet the Spirit.

I was thinking about the day last Tuesday in Muskegon where Rabbi Hartman and Martin Marty dialogued for the day about "Religion That Heals, and Religion That Kills". If you are with David Hartman, the Jewish rabbi for long, you know you are with a man in whom the Spirit dwells. It struck me that when the rich young ruler came to Jesus to say, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" what Jesus told him is exactly what Hartman would tell someone today, "Keep the Torah."

Jesus was a good Jewish Rabbi, in whom God's spirit was so regnant that those who met him knew that they were in the presence of God. The whole creedal tradition of the church is trying to say precisely that, and if you dare come back one more week, I will approach that high Christology of John's gospel, which was John's attempt to say simply that in the human existence of this man God was present, and this man said the God that was present in him was available to us all.

Jesus was a Spirit person and the New Testament is the consequence of those who encountered God as spirit in Jesus, giving witness to the fact that there was life in his name, that God is available to us as Spirit. Thank God for that.