

Good News of Cosmic Dimension

Easter tide I

Text: I Corinthians 15:22; Matthew 28:19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Easter is focused on Jesus. That's quite understandable, because Jesus is the one who was raised from the dead, and so our liturgy, the music, the anthems - all of it is very much focused on the risen Lord. That's understandable. But, I want to say to you this morning that Easter is not so much a matter of Christology, that is, the doctrine of Christ, as it is theology, that which is about God and that which God has affected. Resurrection was God's mighty act. Resurrection was God's sign, a sign in the midst of history of cosmic significance and eternal dimension. Easter is good news. Good news for the cosmos about God's intention, God's "Yes" to life, God's "No" to death, God's "Yes" to love, God's "No" to hate, God's "Yes" to light, God's "No" to darkness. It is understandably a story that lifts up Jesus, but it is more profoundly a story about God.

Jesus died. If you followed or participated in the drama of Holy Week, if you were here on Maundy Thursday when the sanctuary grew dark and the altar was stripped and we left in silence, if you were here in the meditative, somber mood of Good Friday, if you came to the Easter Vigil and saw the sanctuary engulfed in darkness, then you know that Christian faith acknowledges that Jesus died. Jesus died a human death. Jesus as a human person entered into the powerlessness of death. As far as Jesus was concerned, it was over, which is why the brightness of Easter Sunday is not because of something intrinsic in Jesus, but of something intrinsic in God, the Creator, the One Who will not allow death to reign. God's way is life. That is Easter. It is a theological affirmation. It tells us something about God and it is the good news that in the end, there is life !

Paul understood that. Paul was one who was absolutely gripped by that vision of the risen One whom he knew had been crucified but now knew to be still living, and who had called him to tell this good news, particularly to the Gentiles. After he founded the Church in Corinth, he kept in touch with them via letters, like the two epistles to the Corinthians. They were raising some questions, and so, in his letter, the one we call First Corinthians, he deals with this matter of resurrection. He cannot express its truth, its mystery. He stumbles and stammers around as he tries to give expression to it, but of this he is quite convinced - that the whole of

the Christian Gospel, the "Good News" has to do with the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. He tries to explain the magnitude of what has happened by borrowing from the Genesis story, the Creation Story, the story out of Israel's tradition where, through the disobedience of one man, Adam, death came upon all. He says, as it were, Jesus is the new Adam, the second Adam, and as death came to all through one man, so life comes to all through one man. As in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive.

Notice that the Hebrew thinking was always corporate, always concerning the total community. So when he said, "in Adam all die," he meant all humankind die. There was a commonality of the human story, which was under the sentence of death. In the light of God's action, raising Jesus from the dead, Paul saw a sign, a sign that that sentence of death was not ultimate. Rather, the ultimate, final, last exciting word was life. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all shall be made alive. It is as inclusive on the one hand as it is on the other - and here is where we sense Paul's strain of universalism. For what he is saying is that God's action in Jesus has implications for the whole human family. This Good News, the raising of Jesus by the power of God was a sign, a light, an indicator, a marker, something that could be laid hold on and believed in and hoped in for all of us. Paul had had a particular revelation, but he understood it to have a universal application. A transformation of the whole of reality, which he understood to embrace the whole of humankind.

Now Matthew had a similar understanding of the momentous transforming power of the resurrection. Matthew's Gospel is the only Gospel that sees Jesus' ministry, pre-crucifixion, as focused strictly on Israel. Did you know that? The reason we don't know that is that we don't study these Gospels as units having their own context and their own message. We throw them all into the blender and pour out a homogenized Gospel. We pick up a little of Matthew, a little of Mark, a pinch of Luke and a dash of John, and we get one blended picture. But, Matthew has Jesus, pre-Easter, interested only in Israel, the Jewish people. He only talks to two Gentiles in Matthew's Gospel. One is that Syro-Phoenician woman.

I love the way Krister Stendahl talks about that story. He tells it as one of his students preached it one day. Jesus and his disciples needed a retreat, so they journeyed into the countryside, beyond the precincts of Israel. A woman approached them there, pleading with Jesus to heal her daughter. The disciples said, "Go away. We're on retreat. The master said if we don't do this once in a while, we'll burn out. Go away." Well, she was not going to take their "no" for an answer. They said to Jesus, "Do something about this woman." So he says, "Look, I am sent to none but the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Can you imagine Jesus, meek and mild, shunning this woman, saying, "Look, it's Israel, not you"? She said, "But I have a great need." He said, "I can't give the food on the table to the dogs." This is Jesus, now, referring to the woman and Gentiles as dogs. She was quick. She responds, "Look, under the family table there are crumbs which

the dogs may eat." Jesus is taken aback and replies, "Woman, that's some faith. I have never found such a faith even among my own." And he healed her daughter.

There was one other exception he made, and that was for the servant of a Centurion who was ill. He healed that servant. That Centurion also demonstrated great faith. If you read in Matthew's Gospel, you will find the story, but you don't find the reason that Jesus responded to that Centurion. You have to go to Luke for that. But, it's obviously the same story. Luke says, when the Centurion came, the elders of the synagogue came over to Jesus and they whispered in his ear, "Help him out. He paid off our building debt." True. True story. Luke 7:1, you can read it yourself!

Two times only he addressed Gentiles in the book according to Matthew. For the rest, the pre-Easter Jesus was interested solely in Israel. When he sent out the disciples on their missionary journey, he said, "Go through the cities of Israel. Do not go any place where there are Gentiles." He said, "You're going to have enough to do before the end comes. You won't get through all the cities of Israel."

Yet it is this Gospel, Matthew, that concludes with what the Church always calls The Great Commission: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature, to the nations, to the Gentiles, teaching them, healing, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." That's the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, post-Easter.

Now remember, this book is written six decades down the line. There's already now a Christian Church, a Christian community. I think we have to admit that the resurrected Jesus did not gather with those disciples and say to them, "Go to all the world and teach the Gospel and baptize them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit." If that had been done, if it had been that clear a few days after Easter, there wouldn't have been such a struggle in the early Church to find out who they were and what they were supposed to do. Obviously, Matthew is taking the whole story of Jesus and then he's giving a distillation of what now is his understanding of the resurrection, what the implications were. For Matthew, the implications of Resurrection were that this one who had been focused strictly on Israel had now, by the power of God, been raised up to create good news for a broader community. Now was the time to break out of Israel's particularity and to create a community universal and inclusive, of all the nations, of all people. This Good News had universal implications for the building of another community. Krister Stendahl likes to say that Israel was Laboratory One. God's Laboratory One. Israel understood itself as a particular community that was, in its life, to be a light to the nations. And now it was time for Laboratory Two; now it was time to break out of that narrow community and to have, well, Gentile time. It was a broadening, a building of a new kind of community that was inclusive, that was universal, that was for all.

Stendahl also notes that the Jewish people believed itself to have a particular revelation of the one true God, and the truth that it understood was the truth that

impinged on all people, but what Israel never expected was that all people would become Jews. Israel was content to be Israel, to live in the light of its revelation, to witness to that revelation, and to let the positive effects of its witness wash off on the world, but not everybody was supposed to be a Jew. There was never a movement to make the whole world Jewish. They were a particular community with a particular revelation and a particular understanding of salvation, and they shared it far and wide, but people could receive that light and remain in their respective communities.

Stendahl believes that Matthew had the same kind of an idea for the Christian movement. Once again, it had a message, a particular message, a particular revelation, and it had universal implications. It was for the broadening of that community of faith, but it was not as though now suddenly the whole world would have to become Christian. The whole world should be told the good news and the Good News was for the whole world – Good News, that is, that God, the Creator, is a God of life and not death, that God is for us, that God has an intention for the cosmos. And all of that was and is enough to make you dance and sing, because the news is so good. That in this world where death and decay are all about us, the ultimate word is life and light and love and community! So, go tell the world!

With the Christian movement, that's very likely the way it began. Now, the news was brighter. Now there was an exuberance, there was an excitement, there was a joy, there was a confidence, so that, in the wake of the resurrection of Jesus, a movement developed. Have you ever been part of a movement? Movements are spontaneous. Movements are powerful. Movements are confident. Movements are passionate! And in the wake of the resurrection of Jesus, recognizing now that this good news is about God Who says "No" to death and "Yes" to life, this good news was to be spread everywhere. It was for everybody. It was for the whole world. For anybody who would hear it and heed it and become a part of it - it was an open community now.

But, that movement was so powerful, so full of fire, it gained such ascendancy that within two or three centuries it became a force to be reckoned with. And as it gained in dominance, it became domineering. Then, contrary to the model of Israel that shared its witness but didn't force everybody to become a Jew in order to have access to God, the Christian Church linked its particular revelation with a universal mandate to make everybody like we are. Eventually it gained great power in its association with the state, with the Roman Empire. And over the centuries, for 2000 years, it has grown, it has become powerful, and in its wake we have a tragic history that I think as a Church we've never fully owned up to - the Crusades and its brutal intolerance; the Inquisition with its burning of heretics and forced baptisms; pogroms, anti-Semitism, creating the soil for the horror of the Holocaust. Why? Because a movement became dominant, powerful. It had this wonderful vision of God, the God of life; it had this vision to share with all, but rather than remaining a witnessing community, it became a domineering

community, coercively using its power to enforce conformity to its particularity as though that particularity was to be of universal application rather than simply a universal witness, an invitation.

And now, after almost 2000 years, the Christian Church, which has been so dominant, is tired. The Church is sick at soul today. Its shrill rhetoric only betrays its lack of confidence. In those early centuries, it was a movement of joy, it had power, it was soulful, it was exuberant, it was strong, it was empowered, it was open, it was excited, it swept the world! But, it's not a movement anymore, not really. It's an institution. It still has a lot of resources, it still has a lot of wealth, it still has a lot of numbers, and it can linger perhaps for a long time. But, it's not a movement; it's not strong, it's not vibrant, it doesn't have soul, it doesn't have passion, it doesn't have joy unspeakable, full of glory! It is a skeleton of itself. Its life is a denial of its message and a betrayal of the one who is its founder, who reached out in compassionate embrace to all.

But, I think we're on the threshold of something new that's breaking. I think there's going to be a groundswell in this old world of ours. It's breaking out because good news cannot, finally, be kept under. And the good news is that the dream is bigger, that the cosmos is one and that all people belong together. There is underfoot something that will transform the face of the earth. And God knows if it doesn't happen, we'll destroy each other. Witness our history of divisiveness, violence, war and devastation. But, we're learning. Here and there, there's a straw in the wind.

Last Sunday evening we finally made ABC News. Perhaps you've heard. We were linked with Mohammed Ali, this noble human being who can no longer articulate for himself. But there he sat, his wife next to him, who said for him, "Muslim, Jew, Christian - they're all God's children." And then we came on, 9 1/2 seconds! We, too, articulating that the eternal embrace is inclusive. That it is arrogance to proclaim otherwise. Then later in the evening I caught the last half of the film, "Gandhi," and I was deeply moved again as that man of India who was so impressed with Jesus said, "I am Hindu, I am Muslim, I am Christian." And single-handedly, through a spiritual power, changing the landscape of that nation with all of the chaos and all of the death that ensued, nonetheless, affecting a transformation through a kind of spiritual vision and methodology that he learned from Jesus, among others. And, of course, Gandhi influenced Martin Luther King and there was in this nation a significant address of the evil of racism. And, as the second millennium is coming to its end, after 2000 years, this dynamic movement of Jesus People which has become a tired institution, wondering if it can survive, will yield up its arrogant exclusivity and there will be a joining of heart and hand, of all people of good faith who believe in God the Creator of all, Whose intention for all is life and not death, love and not hate, light and not darkness. Now, there's good news! It is news of cosmic dimension and eternal significance. And when we catch it again, the passion will return, the

confidence will return, the joy will return, the power will return, and the world will be changed! Alleluia!