

The Impossible Possibility

Easter Sunday

Genesis 11:27-30, 12:1-3; Romans 4:16-21; Matthew 28:1-10

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
April 20, 2003

Transcription of the spoken sermon

Whatever the final epitaph over my ministry turns out to be, regarding where I have brought this community, you will have to agree that I have brought you the finest scholars and the leading voices on the biblical and theological issues most critical to an intelligent understanding of the Christian faith and the role and function of religion as we have attempted to re-imagine the faith - John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Amy Jill Levine, John Shelby Spong, Huston Smith, N. T. Wright, David Ray Griffin, to name a few. And next weekend - Dr. Charles Kimball.

If on Good Friday evening you were watching Peter Jennings on ABC News, you know that Charles Kimball was one of the expert witnesses that he called. What had happened was that Franklin Graham had conducted a service on Good Friday for the Pentagon, and this created some criticism and some legitimate fear, for Franklin Graham has spoken about Islam as an evil religion and Mohammed as an evil leader, and has declared that Allah is not God. To have Franklin Graham lead a service at the Pentagon probably put the fear of God into some hearts, thinking, "Dear God, here we go with the Crusades again." Fortunately, Franklin Graham is not going to lead a Crusade of sword into Iraq, but he does have his troops poised at the border. The Samaritan's Purse, a relief organization that he heads is ready to move into Iraq in order to make a witness for Jesus, thank God, not with a sword, but with a cup of cold water, which is far better. But, the lack of sensitivity created quite a stir, as well it might. And so, Charles Kimball, Wake Forest University Professor of Comparative Religion, with his extensive knowledge of the Middle East, having been there over 35 times over the last 25 years, an expert in Islam and himself a Christian theologian, was asked by Peter Jennings about his reaction to that Pentagon service, which he indicated he thought was, to say the least, unwise.

Then, if you continued your television watching, at 8:30 on CNN there was a segment on the Bible and Iraq and there was a Muslim scholar who was asked about the country in terms of their also being the children of Abraham, and once again Charles Kimball was asked about this ancient civilization whose city Ur of

the Chaldeans appeared in the scripture lesson this morning, and he was asked particularly by the host about the claim of some that what is going on in the Middle East now may be moving us toward the end of history and the final battle, the Battle of Armageddon. So, once again, Charles Kimball was the person selected to give commentary on that which is happening in our world today, so I feel very privileged that at this time we have such a person coming into our midst to help us to understand and discern what is going on in our world in terms of the function and role of religion.

But, then I opened the *Grand Rapids Press* Religion section yesterday and there kneeling in Westminster Cathedral was N. T. Wright, who was here last May, you will remember. He was here with Marcus Borg and the two of them have written a book together, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. Tom Wright was written up in the *Grand Rapids Press* yesterday because he has just published a book on the resurrection, and he is probably the preeminent Christian scholar in the world today and certainly in the New Testament biblical studies and theological analysis. He is a brilliant scholar, a wonderful human being, and he has just been promoted in the Church of England to be the Bishop of Durham, and I am told the Bishop of Durham seat is the fourth highest seat in the Church of England. So, once again, we have this man on the loose who has been in our midst who is talking about the resurrection to us and the book that he has just written, 817 pages, could you believe, in which he does extensive research and thorough analysis and with brilliant mind and elegant writing, talks about the resurrection of Jesus.

You may remember when Marcus Borg and Tom Wright were here together. They preached last Pentecost, and I had suggested to you that I didn't care which one you followed, you could be right with Borg or wrong with Wright, it was up to you. But, after that interesting weekend, certainly you got the sense that Marcus Borg and Tom Wright had a different understanding of the Easter miracle, a different understanding of that resurrection reality, although both took it very seriously. There was an excerpt from Tom Wright's book in the most recent *Christian Century*, and having read that, I read once again the authentic Tom Wright as he set forth a traditional view of the resurrection which was precisely the view with which I came here in 1960 fresh out of seminary (emphasizing fresh). In his portrayal of this in the article, which is an excerpt from the book, we have again the standard Christian understanding. Tom Wright is very clear about the fact that Easter is a significant event, it is a cosmic event, it is world-shaping event, it is far more than simply the fact that I shall have life after death. It is far more than the fact that my sins are forgiven. Tom Wright is very clear about the fact that what happened at Easter was the establishment of the beachhead of God in this world and it was a world-shaping, world-determining event. But, he said it all hinges on the tomb being empty.

And that is where I disagree with him. He insists that if the tomb was not empty, if that body had not come out of the grave, then the whole thing is questionable.

Again, that is where I disagree with him because I want to say to him, "Tom, I don't need a body coming out of a tomb. I don't need a confirmation miracle on the part of God to see that what happened in Jesus was a life-changing, world-transforming event." I want to say to him, "It's not about a corpse. It's not about an empty tomb. It's about the presence of the risen one. It's about the fact that this Jesus lived and the way he lived and the words he spoke and the deeds he performed." I want to say to Tom, "Easter is about remembering Jesus and celebrating the fact that Jesus crucified lives, that Jesus crucified is God incarnate, and God crucified is God alive and well in this world." I don't need a miracle. I don't need to see a body rise. All I have to do is look at Jesus. All I have to do is linger with Jesus. All I have to do is let my being imbibe Jesus, the way he was, the way he lived, the road less traveled that he followed.

Didn't you sense it again this Lenten season in which we were going through all of the darkness in our world? Didn't you sense it Thursday night in the garden, the anguish of the garden as he prayed and wept? Didn't you sense it on Good Friday in the darkness? Easter is not to get out of the darkness. Easter is not to get away from the cross. Easter is not to get away from the tragedy of this world. Easter is not Easter lilies and bells and Hallelujahs. Easter is remembering Jesus, the Jesus whose life was the incarnation of God, the Jesus in whom the eternal infinite intention of God found flesh. Easter is about remembering Jesus whose face shows us the heart of God. I don't need an empty tomb. I need Jesus, the Jesus of Good Friday and the Jesus of Maundy Thursday, and the Jesus who set his face to go to Jerusalem. I need the Jesus who spoke truth to power, the Jesus who took children on his lap. The Jesus who respected women. I need the Jesus full of compassion whose heart went out to the harassed people of his day. That's enough for me.

Oh, the disciples were despairing and they were afraid at the crucifixion. Of course, they were. They didn't know what to think and their hopes were dashed and they went off to Galilee and they went fishing. But, eventually, inevitably, they knew his presence still. They knew the presence of the risen Lord. They said, "Jesus lives." They said, "Jesus is with us." There were moments of epiphany. There were those strange encounters. There were breakfasts on the beach. There was a fish dinner in one of their homes. He came into the midst of a room where the doors were locked. He walked with two on the road to Emmaus and they didn't know him until he broke bread and their eyes were opened and their hearts burned, and they said, "My God! My God, he's alive!" Easter is not to get away from the darkness. Easter is not to forget about Lent. Easter is not somehow or other to plaster all the world's darkness with joy and light, whistling a happy tune to make ourselves believe that it is other than it is. I don't need a miracle. I need Jesus - the way he was, the way he lived. I need to remember him. I need to remember *him*.

Last evening in our Easter Eve Vesper Service, I experienced communion as powerfully as I have ever experienced it. It has for a decade been a wonderful

Easter celebration to come to this table, to take bread and cup, to say, "The Lord is risen. The body of Christ." But, I come to this Easter and realize the celebration of the Lord's Supper is the most critical thing we can do on Easter because it is remembering Jesus. It is remembering the way he was. It is remembering the life he lived. It is remembering him, the words he spoke, the demeanor of his life. To remember there was God. To remember that is the life, that is the way, that is the truth. Of course, no one will ever come to God apart from that one, apart from that way of being, for the God reflected in the fact of Jesus is not the God of almighty power who snaps his finger and rolls a stone away.

That God is the vulnerable God, the crucified God, that God is the God of persuasive love who stands by in our own world reeling on its way with all of the tragedy and all of the bloodshed and all of the violence and all the war, waiting, waiting, waiting and Jesus, that one human being, not only human being, but one human being representative of what all human beings would be to fulfill the intention of God. That Jesus, that human being, that divine intention in flesh, that is the only hope of the world, and therefore, we come to this table.

Last night in the dramatic presentation, after the drama of the cross and the empty tomb, Jesus came, and he had a cup and he had bread. Peter and John came and knelt here and two of the women knelt here and he said to them, "Do you remember the way I lived?"

They said, "We remember, Lord."

He said, "Do you remember the words I spoke?"

They said, "We remember."

And he said to them, "Do you remember the last night when I took bread and cup?"

And they remembered.

Then he took the bread and the cup and he gave it to them and he said, "Whenever you see those who are excluded, embraced, remember me. Whenever you see one speak truth to power, remember me. Whenever you feel compassion flow within you, remember me. Whenever you see the possibility for hope for a new world, remember me." And each time they said, "We remember. We remember. We remember."

You see, I don't need an empty tomb. I don't need a corpse coming out of a grave. I need to remember. *I need to remember that impossible possibility*, for there has appeared that one who is the incarnation of the divine intention from all eternity and it has appeared here and it lives with us still and beckons to us still, the God of vulnerability beckoning us with the lure of love, to remember and to be as he was in this world.

Oh, I know this old world reels on its way and you may say it's hopeless, and sometimes I feel it is hopeless, and I have gone through this Lenten season with a heavy heart full of despair, I have to confess it to you. I didn't even really want Easter to come. But, then I remember old Abraham. What do you think he thought when God said, "Leave your home and family and go to a place that I will show you and I will make you a father of many nations. Your seed will be like the stars in the heaven and the sands of the sea." And Abraham, an old man with an old wife, but that is not all. Genesis 11:30, one of the most significant and poignant statements in all of the Bible, tells us Sarah was barren. You see, when God would do a new thing, when God would create a new people in order to create a new world, God begins in human barrenness, because we have to do here not with human possibility, but with the eternal God whose divine intention has found flesh, for, Abraham and Sarah had a son, who had a son, who had sons from whom came a people from which people came Jesus.

Jesus is the only hope of the world. Jesus is the way and the truth and the life. There is no other possibility. The old world goes on its way and we still go on that way. We still make war in order to find peace. And all the time, God is crucified and Jesus pleads with us, "Remember. Remember. Remember me."

Come to this table. Remember Jesus. That is an Easter celebration.