

EASTERTIDE

Easter is the opening of the season of Eastertide. With the cry, “The Lord is risen; he is risen indeed”, the church celebrates the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The celebration of Christ’s resurrection continues for forty days, commencing with Easter itself and concluding with Ascension Sunday.

It is important to note that Easter is not the close of the Lenten season; it is the opening of the Easter season. Lent officially concludes at noon on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, as the church keeps vigil, awaiting Jesus’ resurrection from the dead.

Easter – the Feast of the Resurrection of Christ – is the greatest and oldest celebration of the Christian Church, both in the Western (Roman Catholic, Anglican and Protestant) and Eastern traditions. The long preparation of Lent and the resulting fifty-day celebration of the resurrection following Good Friday indicate the central importance of Easter. It – and not Christmas – is the most important celebration of the Christian year.

The church has celebrated Easter and Eastertide in many ways. In the earliest church, catechumens were baptized early on Easter Day, joined the church and received their first holy communion. In the middle ages, the night before Easter was celebrated by the illumination of the churches awaiting the Day of Resurrection. In both the eastern churches and in many Reformation churches, the congregation would gather on Saturday night, as they waited for the dawn that would signal Christ’s resurrection. Picking up on the theme of awaiting the dawn, an Easter Sunrise Service was added to the church’s liturgy by the Moravians in the early eighteenth century, and that tradition spread across all of Christendom. The liturgical color for Easter is white.

What is the derivation of the name, “Easter”? The Venerable Bede (c. 673-735) stated that it comes from an Anglo-Saxon spring goddess, “Eostre”. There is no doubt that, like Christmas, the church “baptized” a pagan spring fertility holiday, adapting it to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. The remnants of that pagan holiday are reflected today in “Easter bunnies” and “Easter eggs” – both reminders of fertility.

Unlike Christmas, the date for Easter is movable. It is determined by the Pascal Full Moon (or the date of the full moon in the latter part of March or in early April). Thus, Easter will fall in any given year between March 21 and April 25.

Easter Sunrise

In some traditions, particularly in Protestantism, the celebration of Easter begins at dawn, in a sunrise service. This tradition was first introduced to the church by Moravian Christians who gathered at Easter dawn in their cemetery in their town of Salem in the British colony of North Carolina so that the saints who had preceded them in death could join with them in celebrating the Lord’s resurrection (and, consequently, their resurrection). When a church has a cemetery,

mausoleum or burial grounds as part of their property, the Easter Sunrise service is often held, not in the church sanctuary but in that graveyard.

There is no lectionary for the Easter Sunday sunrise service, but one can select from the scripture that are in the Easter Vigil (see the Holy Week season of this lectionary, the seventh day [i.e., the night before Easter]).

Easter Sunday

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; Matthew 28:1-10; John 20:1-18; Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4

Matthew 28:1-10 is the story of the resurrection of Jesus. It is a story told in common with Mark, Luke and John. But Matthew puts an intriguing twist on his account of the resurrection, one that reflects the unique message of Matthew about Jesus as the marginalized Messiah facing the political, economic and religious powers of Rome and of Israel.

The larger account includes within it three stories that appear only in Matthew. It begins with the unusual twist upon Jesus' crucifixion that Matthew presents through his unique stories. All of those stories have to do with Jesus as the marginalized Messiah, facing the political, economic and religious powers of the Empire of Evil (Rome and the Jewish priests, Pharisees and Sadducees) who are seeking to control, exploit, oppress and consequently dominate the world and its inhabitants to satisfy their own lusts for power, prestige and plenty.

Jesus is led off to Golgotha, is mocked, spit upon, nailed to the cross and crucified. Then, once Jesus is hanging upon the cross, Matthew presents his first story unique only to his account.

“In the same way the chief priests also, along with the scribes and elders, were mocking him, saying, “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, ‘I am God’s Son’” (Matt. 27:41-43).

This is not simply a mocking of Jesus. It is far more than that. Each of the three statements recalls a previous claim Jesus made about himself in the Gospel of Matthew. The speaker then asserts that Jesus' crucifixion invalidates that claim. First, “He saved others; he cannot save himself”. Jesus claimed to be the Savior; now we see that he not only cannot save anyone else; he can't even save himself. Second, “He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross and we will believe in him”. Jesus claimed to be Messiah, yet whoever heard of a crucified Messiah? Third, “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to, for he said, I am God's Son”. Jesus claimed to be divine (the Son of God); well, you don't see God delivering him, do you? The taunting of the Jewish leaders, therefore, is very specific, seeking to invalidate each of Jesus' claims about himself as Messiah, Savior, and the Son of God.

This, then, is God's darkest hour – for the very systems God created are now the systems that reject Jesus politically (Messiah), economically (Savior),¹ and religiously (Son of God). So it is that Matthew records Jesus' death with the words, "Jesus cried again with a loud voice and breathed his last" (27:50). Then comes the second story unique only to Matthew.

"The chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, "Sir, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away, and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead,' and the last deception would be worse than the first." Pilate said to them, "You have a guard of soldiers; go, make it as secure as you can." So they went with the guard and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone" (27:62-66).

Matthew's understanding of the significance of the resurrection of Jesus as reflected in 28:1-10 cannot be understood except from the vantage point of these two uniquely Matthean stories. The first story publicly repudiates all that Jesus stood for. The second story demonstrates the intentions of the Judean elite to stamp down any attempt on the part of Jesus' followers to continue his movement. There are two important nuances to this second story unique to Matthew.

First, the elite have seemed to have won. They have killed Jesus, they have scattered his followers, they have destroyed his movement and they have seemed to have permanently silenced their merciless critic, opponent and enemy. The power of the Empire, the control of Israel's priestly class, the centering of life upon the powerful few dominating the peasants and building a world that served only the elite's purposes has now been achieved. The Principalities and Powers have won!

Second, even though they have apparently won, the elite worry that their victory may only be temporary. They had killed Jesus. They had defeated his movement. And yet, the Powers that Be still feared Jesus. The systems were afraid of a dead prophet! But that is always the nature of every political, economic and religious system, Matthew is suggesting by telling this story. It is important to understand that systems of domination are always afraid. Their rhetoric and actions are those of power and control. But the systems themselves know how weak they truly are. Their use of dominating power is flaunted precisely because they know that, in the final analysis, they rule only by the consent of the governed. And they can't sustain forever their use of dominating power if the people reject them and their power. Simply look at how quickly and effortlessly the Soviet Union collapsed! So they fear even a dead prophet whom they, themselves, have executed.

Now – and only now, Matthew has fully set the stage for the story of Jesus resurrection. As is true of the other gospel narratives, the gospel of Matthew doesn't end with a cross but with an empty tomb. "But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the

¹ In ancient Israel, the concept of salvation had an economic nuance to it, as well as spiritual (e.g., Deut. 28:29; II Chron. 6:21; Ps. 149:4; Isa. 61:10). This ancient understanding of salvation as being economic as well as spiritual is preserved in today's English language when we refer to "saving" our money or having a "savings" account.

place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him’. This is my message for you” (28:5-7).

Matthew tells us three things about Jesus’ resurrection. First, he proclaims that Jesus rises from the dead! Jesus conquers the systems! Why? Because they couldn’t keep a good man down! The power of God as expressed by Jesus could not be controlled by the systems. They had tried. They had tried to put a halt to Jesus’ exposure of them and his call for Israel to practice the Jubilee kingdom of God. And the systems thought they had won by executing him. But Jesus rose again – guaranteeing a life and power to the movement that could never be stamped out!

Second, Matthew places a particularly important sentence within his story of the resurrection that often gets overlooked. But the primary point he wishes to make about the resurrection in the light of his full story about Jesus is captured in that sentence. “For fear of him (the angel who rolled back the stone and announced Jesus resurrection) the guards shook and became like dead men” (28:4). The representatives of Rome and of Israel’s clergy aristocracy – the guards – witnessed the announcement of the angel, saw the empty tomb, recognized the import of the angel’s words, and then “shook and became like dead men”. The representatives of Rome’s military might, those responsible for securing the tomb against either terrestrial or celestial violation “became like dead men”. Rome’s political and military might was exposed as helpless! Israel’s religious and economic might was dead! God has out-empired the empire by rendering it lifeless!

Third, the vehicles for the sharing of the message of Jesus’ resurrection were two women – “Mary Magdalene and the other Mary”. It is the women – themselves the most marginalized of the marginalized disciples of the marginalized Messiah – who go to the tomb that Easter Sunday. And why do they go to the tomb? Mark tells us that they have come to prepare Jesus’ body for burial (Mark 16:1). But Matthew doesn’t suggest that, at all.

Matthew says that they came “to see the tomb” (vs. 1). But the Greek word used here that is translated “see” doesn’t mean to simply observe or notice, as if they were sight-seeing. The word, as used by Matthew, means to gain an understanding of God’s will, priorities or intention (e.g., 13:10-17). They had come to the tomb to make sense out of nonsense, to seek to discern why God had allowed Jesus to die. They had come to “see” – and “see” they did! First, they “saw” the angel who had made soldiers into dead men. But the angel didn’t “deaden” these women (as he had the guards). Instead, he instructed them to go to the disciples to tell them of the resurrection of Jesus from both physical death and from defeat by the systems. The continuation of the story of Jesus’ resurrection was placed in the hands of the most marginalized people within the marginalized disciple community. And they were faithful to that task. And we are witnesses to that faithfulness, even to today!

But before they made it to the abode of the disciples with their good news – their “gospel” – Matthew tells us something else. “So the women left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, ‘Greetings!’ And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him” (vss. 8-9). Second, the women “saw” Jesus!

Suddenly, Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him.

Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me” (vss. 8-10). The women actually meet the risen Christ. They meet him face-to-face. They touch him. They caress him. They worship him. He IS alive. They are no longer depending upon hear-say evidence, even if it was given by an angel. They are no longer depending upon circumstantial evidence – even if it was an empty tomb. They have met Jesus face-to-face. So it is with this news that the women go to the disciples to tell them the good news that Jesus is indeed alive!

But Matthew doesn’t end the story of the resurrection there. And we shouldn’t either. We should read Matthew’s resurrection account all the way to the end as he intended it to be read – all the way to Matthew 28:15. For Matthew’s resurrection story ends with the third story in his crucifixion/resurrection account that is told only by him!

“While (the women) were going (to tell the disciples that Jesus was risen from the dead), the guard went into the city and told the chief priests everything that had happened. After the priests had assembled with the elders (i.e., the Pharisees and Sadducees), they devised a plan to give a large sum of money to the soldiers, telling them, “You must say, ‘His disciples came by night and stole him away while we were asleep.’ If this comes to the governor’s ears, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble.” So they took the money and did as they were directed. And this story is still told among the Jews to this day” (Matt. 28:11-15)

Remember those guards who had such great fear at the angel opening the tomb that they “shook and became like dead men”? Well, they ran away from the tomb and into the city. And in haste, they went directly to the high priest who had so masterfully engineered the trial and crucifixion of Jesus and the guarding of his tomb!

But consider what Matthew is saying. These soldiers were Roman soldiers, posted at the tomb by Pilate specifically at the Jewish priests’ request (27:62-66). They were not temple guards. And consequently, they were not accountable to the high priest, but to Pilate. Yet when security was breached by the resurrection, *the guards went to the Jewish priests and elders*, not to their military commander, Pilate! And they told the priests “everything that had happened”. That is, *these guards were eyewitnesses to the resurrection!*

In other words, what Matthew is telling us is that the chief priests and elders *knew from the eyewitnesses at the tomb that Jesus had risen from the dead!* The Jewish system, with the cooperation of the Roman system, had tried to put a halt to Jesus’ exposure of them and his call to practice the jubilee kingdom of God. And they thought they had won by executing him. But it is at this point that the systems reach their hour of decision. They now **know**, based on the testimony of the guards, that Jesus had risen from the dead. What shall they do? The priests and elders can now admit they made a significant error, choose to confess Christ as Lord, admit their own culpability, and begin using their power to create the jubilee kingdom! Or they can choose to cover it up!

The Jewish political, economic and religious elite chose to cover up their most profound act of injustice. It is what today would be called “damage control”. So the Hebrew elite bribed the guards to lie about what happened at the tomb and to manipulate the Roman political system to guarantee there would be no repercussions for lying. And it worked!

The ending is a tragic tale. Those in power are so committed to their power and to maintaining the status quo that they lie, cover up, and protect their interests. They choose to “save their life” and thereby “lose it” (16:25). And with this action, the powerful political, economic and religious leaders of Judah and the systems they control become the marginalized in the gospel of Matthew and the marginalized Jesus and his church become the center of the world!

Jeremiah 31:1-6. The prophet Jeremiah had the depressing task of constantly and consistently bringing to the nation of Judah bad news, for his task was to call both the people and the powers of Judah to accountability for their rejection of Yahweh and of Yahweh’s shalom community. In fact, Jeremiah’s message was so depressing that the word “jeremiad” has entered into the English language, meaning “a prolonged lamentation or complaint”. It is both magnificent justice and grace, therefore, that God allowed Jeremiah the privilege of being the first prophet of the Babylonian exile to proclaim a future and a hope for Israel. Although that proclamation reached its height in the 32nd chapter of Jeremiah, it begins in the Easter Sunday reading of the Hebrew Bible – a most fitting place for the expression of hope!

Jeremiah 31:1-6 continues a prophecy begun in chapter 30 (and continues on through chs. 32 and 33) that proclaims the good news of Israel’s return from exile and restoration of Palestine. The message of chapter 30 is encapsulated in the words, “On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will break the yoke from off (Israel’s) neck, and I will burst his bonds, and strangers shall no more make a servant of him. But they shall serve the Lord their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them” (30:8-9). Now, Jeremiah links chapter 31 to 30 in its opening words, “At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people” (31:1).

Jeremiah then develops in 31:2-6 (as well as in vss. 7-9 and 10-14) his theme of the northern and southern kingdoms being restored to the land and reunited into one nation. The northern kingdom of Israel had been annihilated by Assyria in 722-721 BCE, and absorbed into that empire. And the southern kingdom of Judah had been conquered by Babylonia in 586 BCE, with its political, economic and religious leadership taken in exile to the city of Babylon. Jeremiah is predicting that, at a later date, those exiles will be returned to the Promised Land and a new united nation will be created with Jerusalem as its single capital. He does this by likening Israel’s restoration to its entrance into Palestine at the close of the Exodus.

“Thus says the Lord: the people who survived the sword found grace in the wilderness; when Israel sought for rest, the Lord appeared to him from far away! I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you” (vss. 2-3).

As God delivered young Israel from Egyptian slavery at the Exodus, so God will deliver an older Israel from Babylonian exile and Assyrian annihilation. As God molded Israel into a nation

through its embrace of God's covenantal Law in the Sinai wilderness, so God will mature Israel into a people who will give themselves over to that covenant Law in the "wilderness" of Babylonian exile. As God led a much more sober Israel into the Promised Land under Joshua, so God will lead a chastised Israel back to the Promised Land at the close of Babylonian captivity.

It is important to recognize that the Exodus was to the ancient Hebrews what Jesus' resurrection was to the early Christians. It was the supreme indication both of God's choice of them and of God's continuing grace toward them and commitment to them, no matter their exigencies. That conviction is captured very powerfully in today's Old Testament lesson. God says to Israel, "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel" (vss. 3b-4). It is the Lord's love that is the foundation of God's commitment to them and election of them as God's people (Deut. 7:6-7). That commitment is an everlasting commitment, surviving even slavery in Egypt or exile in Babylonia. It is a continuing commitment, whether in wilderness wanderings, in servitude to another nation, or whether it is in living in the abundance and prosperity of their own land. It is a commitment in bad times as well as in good, in storms as well as in sunshine. For it is the supreme manifestation of God's "everlasting love" for them.

One of the most touching manifestations of this commitment is caught up in God's use of the word "virgin" to typify the newly-restored Israel (vs. 4a). That was a word neither God nor Jeremiah needed to have used. After God had given Palestine to Israel and they had lived for 600 years under both judges and kings, Israel had frequently played the role of a harlot both in its relationship with God and with God's intentions for them as a people. They had been brought into Canaan as God's chosen community – a community committed to God through the covenant made upon Mount Sinai – a commitment to be a community shaping its politics around justice for all (but particularly its most vulnerable and marginalized), its economics around equitable distribution of its wealth (in order to eliminate all poverty) and living as a people in intimate relationship with God (God as husband to Israel as wife).

But they had chosen to play the harlot with that commitment. They had chosen as a people to imitate the remainder of the world and build a politics of unilateral power that oppressed the vulnerable and marginalized, an economics of greed that hoarded wealth and thus exploited their poor (as they had been exploited by Egypt and, later, Assyria and Babylonia), and to smother relationship with God with orthodox but cold worship, ritual, rules and regulations. Thus, the term prophets used to most often describe the spiritual, economic and political condition of Israel was that of harlot (e.g. Isa. 1:21; Jer. 5:7; Ezek. 16:31-35; 23:5-44; Hos. 4:15; Joel 3:3; Micah 1:7; Nah. 3:4). And the supreme indicator of that harlotry was that they could no longer remain as one people, but rebelled against God's chosen king (David's lineage) and established separate nations!

But now God calls Israel a "virgin". She was anything but a virgin, for she had played the whore for 600 years! Yet, it is not that God calls her his "forgiven wife" nor even his "bride". He calls her "virgin", as if she had never committed adultery in the first place! It is as if, in his mind, she never had at all any adulterous past! It had been erased! It had been dismissed! It was as if it had never happened at all! Through Jeremiah's new covenant made with Israel by God, Israel's past had been thoroughly cleansed and she was made fresh all over again – as if she had never

played the harlot with both God's love of her and God's call to her to be a just, equitable, and loving people! Who says the Old Testament is not a gospel of grace!!!

What, then, is Israel's response to such amazing grace? "Again, you shall take your tambourines, go forth in the dance of the merrymakers. Again you shall plant vineyards on the mountains of Samaria; the planters shall plant and shall enjoy the fruit. For there shall be a day when sentinels will call in the hill country of Ephraim: "Come, let us go up to Zion, to the Lord our God" (vss. 4b-6)".

"Like Miriam after the crossing of the sea, virgin Israel will lead dancers in their merrymaking over their rescue (Exod. 15:20-21). Agricultural life will resume in Samaria and Ephraim (names for the former Northern Kingdom), and from there the people will process to Zion. Jerusalem will become the place of the family reunion".²

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 is a song of victory, built around the opening and closing refrains, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever" (vss. 1, 29).

Psalm 118 was originally intended to be used in the Feast of Tabernacles. The high priest calls the people to worship with the cry, "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever". The term "steadfast love" is a translation of the Hebrew word *chesedh*, which means God's unconditional, "grace-filled" love that is totally loyal to us and which then expects of us comparable "loyal love". But whether we respond with such loyalty, God will remain committed to us because God has promised so to be toward us.

The psalm then describes a magnificent procession of king, priest and people (vss. 19-25) to the Temple. Once arriving at the temple court, the high priest then moves to the altar (vss. 26-28) to place upon it a cluster of branches (Lev. 23:40). The liturgy then ends with the entire people praising God through the words that were their call to worship and now becomes their benediction: "O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever"!

The overarching theme in the psalm, stated in many different ways throughout that hymn, is captured best in verse 14: "The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation". Therefore "with the Lord on my side, I do not fear. What can mortals do to me" (vs. 6)?

Portions of this psalm are among the best-known in the Psalter. They are meant to march in order with each other, with one inevitably following the other. "The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (vss. 22-24).

This Psalm reminds us that acting out his *chesedh* love, God takes that which is rejected or despised, "things (and people) who are not" and makes them "things (and people) who are." God takes the rejected and marginalized ones – even a prophet sacrificed on a cross and the

² Kathleen M. O'Connor, "Jeremiah", *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), p. 1102.

peasants who hopefully followed him – and builds an entire shalom kingdom upon them. Such resurrection is something that engenders our praise, so that each day becomes a new resurrection day where God’s great reversal can once again burst forth into human society!

John 20:1-18 The initial resurrection story in John is one of unfolding awareness of what God has done in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The stage is set in the opening line of the narrative: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” (20:1a). That to which we will be exposed in the opening story of the resurrection (20:1-18) will be the movement from darkness through dawn to light, from resignation to curiosity to awareness of what God is doing, from closed-minded doubt to inquiry and then to firm belief as the Christian community becomes aware that Jesus is indeed risen from the dead!

The story begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb and discovering it is empty. She runs to the disciples with the message, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2b). The first step in the transformation of Jesus’ disciples is Mary’s conclusion that Jesus’ body had been stolen. That is the most logical conclusion for an empty tomb. But who are the “they” who took the body? The Jewish clerical aristocracy? The Romans? Grave robbers?

Peter and the “other disciple” (likely the unidentified “disciple whom Jesus loved” of John) race to the tomb. The other disciple wins the race, peers into the tomb but doesn’t enter. He notes “the linen wrappings lying there” (20:5). This is the second step from darkness to light. If it had been grave robbers who had invaded the tomb, the linen wrappings wouldn’t be lying there. Those wrappings, together with the myrrh and aloes in which they had been wrapped, would be far more valuable than the body itself. Grave robbers would have left the body and taken the spice-impregnated linen wrappings, or they would have taken the body with the wrappings! But no self-respecting grave robber would have taken the financially-worthless body and left the extremely expensive spice-impregnated lines. So, second, this disciple would have concluded that robbers had not invaded the tomb.

The text then tells us that Peter arrives, rushes into the tomb itself, and notices not only “the linen wrappings lying there, (but also) the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself” (20:6b-7). This, to both disciples, is extraordinary. The linen clothes are lying there almost like a cocoon – but the face cloth is lying off by itself, *neatly folded!* What is the significance of John’s specific noting of this arrangement of cloth?

The face cloth was placed over the face of the deceased before he or she was wrapped, so that as the body was wrapped, the face cloth would be held in place by the surrounding wrappings of the body and around the head (like a turban). If the Jewish rulers or Romans had removed the body, they would likely have taken it in the wrappings. If they hadn’t, they would have torn the body out of its wrappings (because their objective wouldn’t have been robbery of the valuable spices) and torn off the face cloth, tossing it into the pile of linen wrappings (as the final article to be removed). They wouldn’t have taken the time to remove it, neatly fold it, and place it aside from the other cloths.

The text tells us that the two disciples “saw and believed” (20:8). But it is careful to make clear that what they believed was not that Jesus had risen, because “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead” (20:9). What, then, did they believe? What they believed was that Jesus’ body could not have been taken by the chief priests or leaders of Israel nor by the Romans nor by grave robbers.

So the first step from darkness to light is the conclusion that Jesus’ body was stolen. The second step is the determination that it was not grave-robbers who took the body. The third step is the realization that neither Israel’s religious leaders nor the Romans had taken the body.

But if none of the “usual suspects” could have taken Jesus’ body, where did his body go? What happened at the tomb? Mary, who obviously had returned to the tomb with Peter and the other disciple, remained behind at the tomb as they “returned to their homes” (20:10). Still curious and hoping for any clue that would unravel this mystery, Mary peeks into the tomb again – and is stunned by what she sees. Inside the tomb are “two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying” (20:12). They ask her why she is weeping.

Mary’s reply to the angels is similar but not identical to her initial report to the disciples. She says, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him” (20:13, cf. 20:2). The difference in her two statements is one word. In her first statement to the disciples, she called Jesus “*the* Lord”. In this statement to the angels, she calls Jesus “*my* Lord”. She is moving from the objective to the subjective, from a distant relationship to personal commitment and loyalty, from doubt to faith.

She then turns and sees a man behind her. Perhaps *he* took the body! He asks her a question somewhat different from the angels: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking” (20:15)? This is the essential question throughout the Gospel of John – “Whom are you seeking?”

She supposes this man to be the gardener, and says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away” (20:15). Mary still cannot believe the unbelievable. If neither the Judean leadership nor the Romans nor grave robbers had taken Jesus’ body, perhaps this gardener had. This is the fourth step!

Now comes the fifth step. “Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni” (20:16)! Jesus is alive! Jesus has risen from the dead! And here he is, directly speaking to Mary! And Mary is overwhelmed with joy and exultation (she even hugs him in verse 17). The light has dawned!

But the process is not yet complete. There is a sixth step. “Go to my brothers and tell them,” Jesus instructs her. So Mary runs to the disciples to announce, “I have seen the Lord” (20:18)! The spread of the good news that “He is risen! He is risen indeed” to the disciples is given to a woman, just as the spread of the gospel to the Samaritans was entrusted to a woman (John 4:29). And resurrection life now pours into the Church!

Acts 10:34-43 is the sermon preached by Peter to Cornelius and his household upon his conversion to Christ and the baptism of his family. It expresses Peter's new understanding that God intends salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews, and thus signals the most profound breakthrough in earliest Christianity that converted it from being a Jewish sect to becoming a worldwide religion.

In this sermon, Peter proclaims that the gospel is to go to the Gentiles (vss. 34-36). He then summarizes that gospel in a confessional statement about Jesus (vss. 38-43) that includes a significant emphasis upon Jesus' resurrection from the dead and his appearance to those "who were chosen by God as witnesses" (vs. 41). Peter concludes the sermon by stating that the church, God's people, are now commanded by Christ to share this good news "to the people" throughout the world.

One of the most intriguing parts of the sermon is Peter's opening statement, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (vss. 34-35). The Greek phrase translated "shows no partiality" is literally "one who lifts faces", so that Peter is saying "I truly understand that God is the one who lifts faces". This is a reference to an ancient custom in the Near East in which, when one greeted or petitioned a superior, he would "bow" or "hang" his head in order to symbolize submission. If the superior lifted up the person's face so that the inferior could look the superior squarely in the eyes, that would be a sign that the superior had thoroughly accepted the inferior and was now favoring him.³ Thus, what Peter is saying here, is that God "lifts the face" of anyone who comes to Him (as had Cornelius), beseeching to be accepted and forgiven. In every nation, there are those who have a receptive nature to God and want relationship with Him – and God will not ignore them!

Colossians 3:1-4 is the epistle lesson for this Easter Sunday. It is Paul's application of the doctrine of the resurrection to both the lives of individual Christians and to the Christian community as a whole.

Paul writes, "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory" (3:1-4).

Paul contends in this passage that the Exodus was not simply an event that happened to Israel and Jesus' resurrection an event that happened to the church. They were both objective facts; that is, they both occurred. But they were far more than objective facts. For the Exodus reshaped Israel's national life spiritually, politically and economically. And the resurrection gave focus and meaning to the Church, centering its life not in an executed Messiah but in a triumphant Lord. As the Exodus profoundly impacted both the formation of Israel as a nation and the lives of many individual Israelites, so the resurrection created the Church and transformed the lives of countless Gentiles as well as Jews. This perspective Paul develops in this epistle lesson for Easter Sunday.

³ Examples of the action of "lifting the face" in scripture would be II Kings 3:14 and Lev. 19:15.

Paul makes a number of theological assertions in this lesson. First, Christian believers have died with Christ (v. 3; 2:11-12, 20). Second, they have been raised with Christ (v. 1; 2:12-13). Third, they are “hidden” with Christ (vs. 3; Eph. 2:6). Fourth, they will be with Christ at his return (vs. 4). Fifth, they have “stripped off the old self with its practices” (vs. 9). Sixth, they have “clothed themselves with the new self” (vs. 10). These are not historical facts to Paul, as would be the Exodus and Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. These are all indicators of God’s work through Christ within and among us as Christians. It is a description of the interior work God has done and is doing in us as we embrace the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ for our own.

Paul likens each of us to Christ. As he died on Golgotha, so we have died to our “harlot” nature (see the Old Testament lesson for this Easter Sunday). That is not to say that we never think, are tempted to act or even do act in selfish, dominating or greedy ways; rather, it is to say that to God, we are now “dead” to such harlotry. Likewise, as Jesus rose from the dead, so we have been raised to new life in Christ – life that is focused on being relational, committed to justice and working to equitably distribute wealth. Third, it is God through Christ who has done this work and keeps on doing this work within us, so that we are protected and secured in Christ. Further, our new relationship with Christ that has been given us by God is an eternal relationship, so that the Christ-life is within us, shows through us and continues within us even to Christ’s ultimate winning of the whole world to a kingdom of justice, equity and relationality (shalom).

If this work that God is doing within and among us is, in fact, occurring, this resurrection life manifests itself in a unique way in our lives. Paul likens a believer to Roman nobility being prepared for the day by his or her slave. That slave “strips off” that lord’s dirty clothing from the night before, bathes him or her and then places upon the nobleperson a fresh, clean toga for that day’s activities. Likewise, God is always at work in our lives, “stripping away” our self-centered, dominant and greedy characteristics, actions and thoughts which occupy us as a “dead” people, bathing us with Jesus’ resurrection power and “clothing” us for a new day with a love for God and humanity, a commitment to justice, the desire to work for the elimination of poverty and thus seeking the shalom of all society.

As we go through the day’s activities, we will inevitably get “dirtied” once again both by the oppositional standards of unredeemed society and our own penchant toward selfishness. Our objective, as we live that day, is to remain as centered on Jesus and working for his kingdom as possible. But, even as we work for Christ and his kingdom, we will still get “dirtied” to some degree. That is the inevitable reality of engaging with the world – but we are called to engage with that world, not to avoid it! So as we remain obedient to the vision of engagement with the world for Christ and his kingdom, and get dirtied as the inevitable result of such engagement, we can do so with the assurance that God will keep on “clothing us with the new self, according to the image of its creator” (vs. 10), so that we can set forth afresh each day in resurrection power, and thus know that we are being faithful to the One who is continuing to resurrect us and our community of faith into new life. This is how the resurrection of Jesus is lived out practically by the Church in its daily life!

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