

APRIL 7, 2012: THE EASTER VIGIL Genesis 1:1-2:2 Exodus
14:14-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Mark 16:1-8

(Though all nine readings should be proclaimed tonight, space limits my commentary to just four.)

The importance of tonight's celebration cannot be overemphasized. No one had to tell early Christians to participate. The liturgy commemorated something each had experienced: dying and rising with Jesus - an action on which every Christian frequently reflected. Its readings touch the heart of our faith.

That's why we first go back to chapter 1 of Genesis. This more "recent" (500 BCE) of our two Genesis creation myths not only zeroes in on Yahweh's complete control over all things, it also stresses how good God's actions are in our lives. Six times the Priestly author tells us Yahweh found the individual acts of creation "good." ("Very good" after the creation of the man and woman!)

It's a message easy to forget when we're in the middle of our daily dyings with Jesus. Most of the time we concentrate on the death dimension of our actions, not their life-giving aspects.

No matter how many readings we omit tonight, we're obligated to read the Exodus narrative of the Israelites' crossing of the sea. This event was not only the most important action of Yahweh in the Hebrew Scriptures, it was also the focus of early Christians when they reflected on Jesus' resurrection. It most mirrored their experience of dying and rising with Jesus. Just when the situation seems most hopeless, God steps in and brings life out of death, freedom out of slavery. No one had to preach a homily on Exodus; everyone understood how it applied to the Good Friday/Easter Sunday event.

When the followers of Deutero-Isaiah were putting his oracles into the order they thought best conveyed his ministry, they saved the best for last. The prophet constantly zeroed in on the power of Yahweh's word, even in the midst of the greatest disaster in the Hebrew Scriptures: the Babylonian Exile. When everything seems lost, God's word is still here, as effective as rain and snow coming down from heaven, watering the earth, "making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats ..." In a parallel way, the life-giving words and experience of Jesus are the source of our imitation of Jesus, even in the midst of our everyday disasters.

Tonight's gospel is especially significant. Most of us have never read the four gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb in one sitting, as the late Raymond Brown always encouraged his students to do. It's the only way to surface the unique resurrection theology of each evangelist.

Many of us mistakenly think the gospel authors composed their empty tomb and risen Jesus narratives as proof for their readers that Jesus had really risen from the dead. Brown presumed the gospel communities already believed Jesus had risen. The evangelists didn't have to prove it. They were much more interested in conveying the meaning of the event than in passing on the fact of the event.

Mark's gospel originally ended after verse 8, mentioning that the women left the empty tomb and said nothing to anyone about the things they'd seen and heard. The subsequent verses were added through the years by well-meaning scribes trying to align Mark's gospel with the other three.

For the first evangelist, the risen Jesus is simply "out there somewhere." There are no specific appearances, no ascension. "Galilee" is where his disciples lived. That's where they're to surface Jesus as a new creation in their everyday lives. Mark is telling his readers that each Christian comes across the risen Jesus in different people, different situations, different places.

We've yet to even scratch the surface of the implications of that belief.

APRIL 15, 2012: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 4:32-35 I John 5:1-6 John 20:19-31

As I mentioned in last week's commentary, our post-Easter liturgical readings overflow with implications of Jesus' resurrection for our everyday lives. It's no accident that today's gospel is always on the Sunday after Easter, no matter the cycle. That can only mean our modern Christian community believes John's insights into Jesus' resurrection should be in the forefront of those implications. These upper-room narratives are even more significant because the evangelist originally ended his gospel with them. (Scholars are convinced chapter 21 was added later.)

All Christian sacred authors agree: our lives should drastically change because of Jesus' resurrection. Luke demonstrates this in our Acts pericope. "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of their possessions was their own; they held everything in common ... There was no needy person among them . . ." This unique action of sharing everything was the way Jesus' followers "bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." If he/she is alive among us, then everything changes - including the way we look at everyone around us.

Of course, this transformation doesn't come without pain. That's why the author of I John mentions that our mentor, "Jesus the Christ, came through water and blood, not by water alone, but by water and blood." "Blood" in this context appears to refer to Jesus' suffering and death. We not only experience life ("water") through him, we also experience pain.

No where is this pain clearer than in our gospel narrative. John's Jesus begins his Easter Sunday night appearance by showing his disciples "his hands and his side;" an obvious reference to his wounds. Though he wishes his followers, "Peace!" it's a peace which comes only to those willing to suffer in order to achieve it.

What form does that suffering normally take? Listen carefully to what the risen Jesus says: "Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."

Scholars don't believe these lines were ever intended to be the Scripture proof for the institutional church's sacramental power to forgive or withhold forgiveness. What we call "confession" is still far down the road. Jesus is speaking to the whole Christian community in this narrative, not to the leaders of a hierarchical institution. And in some sense, he's not giving that community a power they didn't have before he came into the room that night. More than anything, he seems to be pointing out a power they already have, but had yet to surface or understand.

Perhaps our reliance on sacramental reconciliation over the years has also caused us to relegate our personal power of forgiveness to that musty backroom where biblical theology is stored. By the fact it's in one of our gospels, it's clear our sacred authors wanted their communities to reflect on the power they shared as the Body of Christ. Of course, knowing the teachings and example of the gospel Jesus, there's no way any Christian author would ever expect another Christ to retain someone's sins. That part of Jesus' statement seems to have been added simply as a way to warn readers never to do it, reminding them that their lack of forgiveness has just as deep an effect in the lives of others as their actual forgiveness.

No wonder Thomas' well-known proclamation of faith also revolves around Jesus' wounds. As Marcus Borg reminds us in his latest book, *Speaking Christian*, biblical faith isn't belief in dogmas or church pronouncements. It's believing in someone; giving oneself over to the person in whom you believe. In the case of Jesus, you're giving yourself over to someone who only achieves life by suffering.