

MARCH 30, 2013: EASTER VIGIL Exodus 14:15-15:1
Isaiah 54:5-14 Romans 6:3-11 Luke 24:1-12

(Though all nine readings should be proclaimed on this night, space limits me to comment on only four.)

No night of the year is more important for Christians than tonight. It celebrates something which lies at the heart of our faith: Jesus' dying and rising. Unlike Christmas, followers of Jesus have always celebrated Easter. As Marcus Borg points out in his well-received book *Speaking Christian*, salvation revolves around more than just getting into heaven. It's rooted in the new life and freedom we experience right here and now when we courageously choose to die with Jesus.

No wonder our Jewish/Christian ancestors in the faith insisted that, especially on this night, they again hear the story of Yahweh liberating their ancestors from slavery. If Yahweh hadn't led this ragtag band of runaway slaves dry shod through the sea there would be no Judaism, no salvation history. The plight of these oppressed Hebrews would simply have disappeared into the whirlpool of ancient history.

The earliest followers of Jesus identified with this liberated people. His resurrection paralleled the freedom they'd experienced 1,200 years before.

Like the exiled Israelites Deutero-Isaiah addressed, Jesus' Good Friday disciples also felt abandoned by Yahweh. They were forsaken and grieved in spirit, afflicted, storm-battered and unconsolated." Yet, like those same exiles, they were eventually established in justice, no longer worrying about oppression or destruction.

The turnabout experienced both by the slaves who followed Moses through the sea, and the exiles who believed Deutero-Isaiah's liberating words set the stage for the women who went to Jesus' tomb on the Sunday after his execution. They weren't expecting to find what lay around the corner. "Why do you seek the living one among the dead?" the two angels ask. "He is not here, but he has been raised." Instead of anointing a dead body, they now announce a living Jesus.

As encouraging as these other eight readings are, the most important is the pericope from Paul's letter to the Romans. Those participating in today's celebration aren't just listening to how God saved God's people in the past, they're commemorating their own salvation right here and now. "Are you unaware," Paul asks, "that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life."

Except in cases of emergency, all Christians were baptized during the Easter vigil. There was no better time to carry out this ritual. And it was always done by immersion, not by having just a few drops of water poured over one's forehead. The outward sign of this sacrament mirrored the experience of the people who received it. Over a long period of catechumenate they had died to their own value systems and had made the mentality of Jesus of Nazareth their own. They had joined Jesus' death, a prerequisite for receiving Jesus' life. Like him, they had been buried, but then instantly received a new life.

One last point. If one reads the four gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb and Jesus' appearances, one is impressed with the contradictions contained in the narratives. The people who originally collected these gospels and put them into the same set of Scriptures, also saw those contradictions. They didn't hesitate to put them side by side because they were convinced no two Christians die and rise in the same way. The question tonight isn't, "How did Jesus die and rise?" Rather, "How do we die and rise with him?" One size doesn't fit all.

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APRIL 7, 2013: SECOND SUNDAY OF EASTER Acts
5:12-16 Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13,17-19 John 20:19-31

Though scholars presume the actual numbers of early converts to Christianity given in the Acts of the Apostles are somewhat exaggerated, there's no doubt the immediate followers of Jesus demonstrated their faith in such a way that many joined in their decision to become other Christs. What was so attractive about this new way of believing? What prompted such a steady flow of converts to reject their former beliefs and accept those of their Christian friends and family members? What were the "signs and wonders" followers of Jesus were experiencing.

Many Christians today follow Jesus simply because he provides them the best way to get into heaven. They usually don't expect lots of signs and wonders until after their physical deaths. Yet we know from the story of the rich young man in Mark 10 that Jesus' original disciples didn't follow him just because he provided them with a path into heaven. From Jesus' response to the man's question, "What do I have to do to inherit eternal life?" it's clear that keeping the commandments - without any input from Jesus - insures someone's quest to spend eternity with God.

The gospel Jesus offers his followers more than just heaven. He gives us, as he gave the young man, an opportunity to surface God working effectively in our daily lives long before we walk through heaven's gates. That's what he means when he proclaims the "Kingdom of God."

Though we presume, along with the author of Revelation, that the risen Jesus "holds the keys to death and the netherworld," the door into eternity which those keys unlock first opens into this life, long before death and the netherworld appear. Are there signs and wonders which make this life more than just a necessary preliminary to eternity? Is there a value in living our daily lives even if we never discovered the existence of heaven? Jesus' original followers replied to both questions with a resounding, "Yes!".

Jesus taught his disciples how to surface God's presence in everything they did and every person they met. They simply had to look at reality from a different perspective, the perspective from which he looked at it. Among other things, today's gospel pericope shows us that perspective.

Probably the part of this passage most of us will take home with us is the Thomas section. We all identify with his doubting personality. Yet the "forgiveness" words and actions of Jesus are even more significant in our quest to surface God's kingdom in our lives.

The early church wouldn't have regarded Jesus' statement, "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retained are retained," as a proof text for the sacrament of reconciliation, assuring us that priests have the power (and authority) to forgive or not forgive our sins. Rather, the gospel's original readers would have understood that the Spirit the risen Jesus breathed into those in the upper room that Easter Sunday night empowered them and all his followers to forgive. (We presume he never wanted any of his disciples to withhold forgiveness. But, at the same time, he wanted to make certain they understood the consequences of their unforgiving actions.)

When Jesus makes "repentance" a prerequisite for discovering God's kingdom in our midst, he's taking for granted that unless we approach one another with a forgiving personality, we'll have to wait until we die to experience God's presence. What a waste of a lifetime.

John's Holy Spirit does more than help us pass school exams. That Spirit gives us the power and insight to live a worthwhile, forgiving life, the very thing Jesus' first followers offered to those first converts.

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