

APRIL 5, 2015: EASTER VIGIL

Exodus 14:15-15:1 Isaiah 55:1-11 Romans 6:3-11 Mark 16:1-11

Ideally all nine readings should be proclaimed tonight, but space limits commenting to only four.

Just as the ancient Israelites became Yahweh's people through the Exodus, so the early Christians became other Christs through Jesus' resurrection. A rag-tag band of Hebrews had been enslaved in Egypt for several centuries before their God finally leads them "dry-shod" through the sea to freedom around 1,200 BCE. Likewise, Jesus of Nazareth leads his apprehensive followers through death to life around 30 CE. In each case, both sets of disciples never looked at the event as a once-a-life-time happening. They were convinced those saving events took place over and over again, even centuries later, when others needed freedom and life.

Prophesying in the midst of Israel's 6th century BCE Babylonian Exile, Deutero-Isaiah tries to convince his people that freedom is there for the taking. Yahweh is providing it through Persia's conquest of Babylon. Though the original Exodus had taken place 700 years before, a new Exodus was just around the corner. But instead of a new Jewish Moses leading his people to freedom, the pagan emperor Cyrus was opening the gates for Israel's return to the Promised Land. And, just like the original Exodus, there would be "no charge." It wouldn't cost the Chosen People anything. Yahweh's salvation was as near as the road to Jerusalem.

On the other hand, to recognize their imminent salvation, these captive Israelites had to make Yahweh's thoughts their thoughts. They had to look at events and people as Yahweh looked at them; for some, a task as "high as the heavens are above the earth." In this case, they had to accept that Yahweh could not only work through a Gentile, but that this particular Gentile - Cyrus - was actually Yahweh's messiah. It was a leap of faith many found impossible to take, not just in 6th century BCE Judaism, but in parallel situations centuries later.

Likewise, some of the historical Jesus' followers also hesitated to join him in dying. It didn't make sense for them to go through death in order to reach life. Yet that's what other Christs were expected to do. Paul couldn't have said it better. "Are you unaware 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." It's one of those things we have to actually experience to believe.

That's why Jesus' experience of death and resurrection quickly became the norm for all his disciples. The women in Mark's empty tomb narrative didn't trek to Jesus' burial place because they thought he was alive. They went simply to anoint his dead body. After all, they were among the small handful of his followers who had actually seen him die. They couldn't have anticipated what they were about to discover.

It takes a great leap of faith to die to oneself, to give oneself to others. Common wisdom tells us we lose ourselves when we dare to be that generous. Yet just as Jesus of Nazareth was transformed into a new creation when he totally gave himself for those who believed in him, so his followers began to realize that they also were transformed into new creations when they imitated his generosity – for some, a concept also as far above us as the sky is from the earth.

Yet, every time we acknowledge life through death, we go deeper and deeper into the freeing and life-giving mind of God. Something that didn't happen only in 1,200 BCE or 30 CE.

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APRIL 5, 2015: EASTER SUNDAY
Acts 10:14a, 37-43 Colossians 3:1-4 John 20:1-9

It's important to realize that it took time for those who originally discovered Jesus' empty tomb to understand its significance. Though our four evangelists employ the oft-used biblical literary device of having angels provide that significance to us the readers, we can't presume the original participants were so fortunate as to have "everything" explained on the spot. The tradition behind John 21, for instance, presumes Jesus' disciples returned to Galilee and moped around for days before they finally returned to fishing and discovered that Jesus was not only alive but risen, making breakfast for them on the seashore.

Normally Simon Peter is the one credited with being the first to realize the empty tomb meant Jesus had risen from the dead. (That's one of the reasons the early Christian community was convinced its faith was built on the rock of Peter's faith.) But today's gospel pericope gives us a different theology. The Beloved Disciple and Peter simultaneously receive Mary Magdala's message that Jesus' body is no longer in the tomb. Though the former beats the latter to the burial place, the Beloved Disciple, honoring part of the tradition, steps aside and lets Peter go into the tomb first. Yet it's important to note the evangelist states that it was this "other disciple," not Peter, who first "saw and believed."

What's with this Beloved Disciple who often stands out in contrast to Peter in John's gospel? Scholars no longer believe he's the gospel's author. Instead, most contend he was one of the historical Jesus' unnamed disciples, the person who initially evangelized the community for whom this gospel was written. Since he played an essential role in their faith lives, he's given important roles in their gospel. He, for instance, is the one who rests his head on Jesus' chest during the Last Supper, later follows him to Golgotha and receives the commission to care for Jesus' mother.

In a very real sense he's someone who not only came to believe in Jesus' resurrection but was able to help his community achieve that same faith. No wonder the late Raymond Brown entitled his classic book on the Johannine writings, *The Community of the Beloved Disciple*. There would have been no such community, nor a fourth gospel, if that particular disciple hadn't eventually realized the meaning of Jesus' empty tomb.

All our biblical Christian writings depend on a resurrected-Jesus interpretation of his missing body. If someone had stolen the body or Mary and her companions simply went to the wrong tomb that morning, the Pauline disciple responsible for the letter to the Colossians could never have encouraged his readers to die with Jesus. There would have been no reason for them to "think of what is above." Neither could Luke's Peter have assured his listeners in today's first reading that "everyone who believes in him (Jesus) will receive forgiveness of sins through his name." That forgiveness didn't happen because they went to confession, but because, by imitating Jesus' death and resurrection, they, like he, became a new creation. They didn't even have to confess those sins. The person who had committed them had died, and a new person had come into existence.

Just as I presume it took Jesus' original followers a long time to appreciate the implications of his empty tomb, so I presume some of us today might not yet have achieved that insight. We do what he asks because we want to get into heaven. But to actually experience him alive and working effectively in our daily lives might still be something down the road.

What a happy irony if we actually came to understand those implications during today's celebration of Easter.