

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

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Questions at Calvary Sermon Series – Resurrection, Mark 16:1-8

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

“... the Moroccan student interrupted [the language lesson], shouting, ‘Excuse me, but what’s an Easter?’”¹ Perhaps sensing her classmates’ incredulity, she reiterated: “‘I mean it ... I have no idea what you people are talking about.’”²

It was David Sedaris’ second month of a French-as-a-second language course, and in his essay, “Jesus Shaves,” the teacher was leading “an exercise designed to promote the use of [‘one,’ their] latest personal pronoun ... The teacher” – recognizing a pedagogical opportunity in the moment – “then called upon the [class] to explain” the Christian holy day.³

“... ‘It is,’ said [a Polish classmate], ‘a party for the little boy of God who call his self Jesus and ... then he be die one day on [two morsels of lumber].’”⁴ Sedaris continues his recollection of the halting explanations, he and his classmates endeavoring Christianity’s great mystery in a language other than their native tongue: “‘He die one day, and then he go above of my head to live with your father ... He weared of himself the long hair, and after he die, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples ... He nice, the Jesus[!]’”⁵

Sedaris explains, “Part of the problem had to do with grammar. Simple nouns such as [‘cross’] and [‘resurrection’] were beyond our grasp, let alone such complicated reflexive phrases as ‘To give of yourself your only begotten son.’ Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead. ‘Easter is a party for to eat of the lamb ... One, too, may eat of the chocolate.’

“‘And who brings the chocolate?’ the teacher asked.” Knowing the bon mot, Sedaris raises his hand excitedly, “‘The Rabbit of Easter[! The Rabbit of Easter!] He bring of the chocolate.’”⁶

Though I will leave the rest of the story to your reading delight, Lord, have mercy, it is so dang funny – funny, of course, because of Sedaris’ truth-revealing wit, and funny, too, because we Christians can empathize with the challenge of explaining an Easter beyond “a party for to eat of the lamb.”

Accepting that difficulty, these last Sundays at Trinity Church we have made our charge up Calvary’s theological hill during a three-part sermon series. Using vocabulary and ideas outside the first language of our faith, two weeks ago we reckoned “theodicy,” our struggle to understand

the existence of evil in a world created and redeemed by a loving God. We observed that the marginalized, early Church subordinated God's love to God's power and understood their suffering as part of "God's plan" – a necessary, if trying, step toward a future redemption.

However, we rejected the notion that our God would ever purposefully harm, and we *flipped* that ancient understanding, subordinating God's power to God's love. We declared that if God could save one from suffering, then God would save all, for God loves us all, fully and equally. We then made the more demanding logical turn: because God has *not* saved all from suffering, then we must accept *God cannot save any* – not even Jesus on the cross. Appreciating our position of power in the global community, by this claim we recognized our complicity in the world's suffering, as well as our faithful responsibility for the world's healing and renewal.

Last week, we carried those fundamentals directly to the "atonement," our tradition's ideas about what Jesus' crucifixion accomplished. Broadly, we observed that the classical theories continued to emphasize the Cross as part of "God's plan," continuing the early-Church's focus on God's power.⁷ Keeping to our flip of that notion, we viewed the horrors of Good Friday as a consequence of humankind's depravity – indeed, a scene of God's *powerlessness* to intervene. We viewed Calvary as the expression Jesus' great love, "[laying] down his life for his friends," and a call for the Body of Christ to endeavor a like love and like grace and like peacemaking.

As we complete the series and reach the crescendo of this glorious season, today we take up "resurrection." For our survey of Easter understandings, we begin at the beginning, and we consider the Gospel of Mark's record of events:

Following Jesus' death, Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the very Council that had condemned Jesus, breaks ranks and goes "boldly to Pilate [to ask] for the body of Jesus."⁸ Pilate consents to this (what, for the Governor, is a convenience).⁹ Joseph lifts Jesus from the cross and wraps the dead man in a shroud.¹⁰ Mary Magdalene; Mary, the mother of James; and Salome – perhaps suspicious of Joseph's motives – follow the wealthy Councilor.¹¹ They watch as Joseph carries Jesus to a newly hewn tomb and lays him there, rolling a rock across the cave's entrance to secure the site.¹²

"Very early on the first day of the week," the women return to anoint Jesus' body.¹³ Along the way, they understandably worry how they will enter the tomb, asking one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us?"¹⁴ Yet, when they arrive, "they [see] that the stone, which was very large, [has] already been rolled back."¹⁵

Cautious – not knowing who had come before them – they slowly enter the dark space only to see young man, dressed in a white robe.¹⁶ Sensing their fear, this herald reassures them: "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here ... But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."¹⁷

The Gospel then reports: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”¹⁸ Preserving the Greek order of these last words reads like the discussion in David Sedaris’ French class: “To no one anything they said; afraid they were for ...” And that’s it, an “Alleluia” with a question mark.

Early editors seem to have found this conclusion unsatisfying, for they added to Mark’s Gospel a story of Mary Magdalene encountering the resurrected Jesus;¹⁹ added an homage to Jesus’ appearance to Cleopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus;²⁰ and added a scene with “the eleven” where the risen Jesus “upbraids” his friends for their lack of faith.²¹ The other Gospels – all written after than Mark – likewise include more direct testimony to Jesus having been brought back to life, a witness to the first Christians’ devotion to Jesus’ bodily resurrection.

The historicity of these accounts faced scrutiny during the Enlightenment. In the eighteenth century, Deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus flatly accused the Gospel authors of lying and denied the tradition altogether.²² A hundred years later, philosopher David Friedrich Strauss rejected his countryman’s earlier accusation, while still excluding the possibility of any “miraculous” event.²³ Instead, Strauss proposed the Resurrection as a “myth,” one the disciples believed as the *result* of their faith, not as its source. That is, the Gospel authors did not *purposefully* lie, they simply read back into the Passion the depths of their moving convictions.

In the twentieth century, theologians and biblical historians – C.S. Lewis among them – reached back toward the ancient understandings and propose that only Jesus’ bodily resurrection could have supplied the spiritual and emotional ballast to counter the heaviness of the disciples’ devastation at Calvary. They argue the Christian mission would not have launched had God not brought Jesus back from the dead – otherwise, why bother? Jesus and the disciples had lost, their movement having reached an ignominious end. For these scholars, the simple fact of our inheriting the faith testifies to the Passion’s historicity.

Whether confirming or denying the divine “Ta-da!” of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, all these understandings still hinge upon the precedence of God’s power. How might we, instead, pull taught our Calvary thread of flipping that idea and maintaining a priority for God’s Love?

Well, we can begin with an unlikely conversation partner in Karl Barth, who fit himself between the Enlightenment and Modern perspectives.²⁴ While Barth shared uncertainty about the resurrection, he also viewed the empty tomb as “an indispensable sign.”²⁵ Alister McGrath points to Barth’s emphasis on “Paul and the other apostles [not calling] for the ‘acceptance of a well-attested historical report,’ but [asking] for a ‘decision of faith’” ... “*not calling for the ‘acceptance of a well-attested historical report,’ but [asking] for a ‘decision of faith.’*”

Joining this call to faith does not reject Jesus’ having been raised from the dead – and, dadgumit, please do not leave here telling the story that I don’t believe in Easter. Though I readily admit I do not understand how the mechanics of Resurrection work [if you do, lemme know], I do believe that something singular between God and the cosmos happened on this glorious morning,

and we understand that event as this man, Jesus, raised from the dead.²⁶ On Easter, God recreates the universe, a moment unlike any since the creation, and unlike any since.

See, instead of focusing the first of our Easter energies on believing in God's power to intervene in human history²⁷ – deciding whether the Lord can leap tall buildings in a single bound and exceed the limits of our mortal physics and chemistry – **when we lean into God's love as the animating force of the empty tomb, we declare the Resurrection as *more than only a biological event***. And if we can believe in the power of love, *then we can believe in the possibility of Resurrection*.

When we love – when we are beloved on this side of the empty tomb – we entangle ourselves in God's great hope. When we love, the Resurrection overcomes us, captivates us! And as in those Gospel accounts, when we share this Easter love with one another, when we participate in the world's renewal in mercy, grace, and peace, the “risen Jesus appears to us.” For, by our love, we join God's inauguration of the Divine dream, we experience a foretaste of the new world to come, “in revelations ahead of our time” – indeed, in revelations ahead of time itself!²⁸

Sedaris concludes his essay: “I wondered then if, without the language barrier, my classmates and I could have done a better job making sense of Christianity, an idea that sounds pretty far-fetched to begin with. In communicating any religious belief, the operative word is faith, a concept illustrated by our very presence in that classroom. Why bother struggling with the grammar lessons of a six-year-old if each of us didn't believe that, against all reason, we might eventually improve? If I could hope to one day carry on a fluent conversation ... why not give other improbabilities the benefit of the doubt?”²⁹

Oh, Friends, believe: the welfare of our world depends upon Easter! Against all improbabilities and the sufferings we have caused, God hopes that we will build an ever more Beloved Community among one another and in the city we serve. God believes that we can – that we will! – love one another as God loves us all. And in the company of the Holy Spirit, that one day we will realize together the dream of a resurrected cosmos, where there is no death, neither sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting.³⁰

That earth would finally become as heaven is,
we love as Easter companions in this household of God;
Amen.

¹ Sedaris, David. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Back Bay Books, 2000, p. 177.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ibid, pp. 174, 177. I stitch together these quotes (a few pages apart in Sedaris’s essay) to supply the context.

⁴ Ibid, p. 177.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid, pp. 177-178.

⁷ Ransom and *Christus victor* theologies, specifically.

⁸ Mark 16:43.

⁹ Mark 15:45.

¹⁰ Mark 15:46a.

¹¹ Mark 15:47.

¹² Mark 15:46b.

¹³ Mark 16:1-2.

¹⁴ Mark 16:3.

¹⁵ Mark 16:4.

¹⁶ Mark 16:5.

¹⁷ Mark 16:6b-7.

¹⁸ Mark 16:8.

¹⁹ Mark 16:9-11. These several scenes feel like George Lucas’ 1990s additions to the original *Star Wars* trilogy – for anyone who had seen the first movies, the appendages were conspicuous and unnecessary, even insulting.

²⁰ Mark 16:12-13.

²¹ Mark 16:14-18, before commissioning them for the proclamation of the Good News.

²² As earlier in the series, I return to Alister E. McGrath’s *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, here in his chapter on “Faith and History,” pp. 382 and 399, among other references.

²³ Ibid, pp. 398-400.

²⁴ I traced to Barth from Jürgen Moltmann’s *The Way Of Jesus Christ*, pp. 230-232.

²⁵ McGrath, p. 401.

²⁶ In other words, I do not view the Resurrection only *subjectively*, as though each believer can determine their own meaning of the event.

²⁷ Growing up in Shreveport, Louisiana, “accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior” was not just a Sunday-morning confession, but an important social credential. Having been raised a Roman Catholic and then received in The Episcopal Church, I might as well have had horns poking through my temples. The “God-said-it-that-settles-it” culture set keystone importance on the bodily resurrection of Jesus – the dead man literally brought back to life. Related: in those days, I did not let on how much I liked The Smiths because I found their fans so annoying. Likewise, I recognize that my Resurrection reflections still have as much to do with 1980s, Shreveport “Christians” as with the risen Christ. I’m working on it!

²⁸ Moltmann, p. 219.

²⁹ Sedaris, pp.179-180. Yes, I know Sedaris is being sarcastic. I also read that sarcasm to communicate a larger truth, as well.

³⁰ Adapted from “The Burial of the Dead, Rite I” – always an Easter liturgy! – *The Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 492-483. The Commendation’s refrain: “Where sorrow and pain are no more, neither sighing, but life everlasting.”