

23 March, 2008
Easter Sunday
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Easter Sunday! It's always wonderful to have a bright, sunshiny, warm Easter Sunday (laughter). It just makes the heart feel glad. We don't have to worry about it being this early [again] until 2248, so rest easy.

Easter Sunday is a remarkable thing. It has induced amazing amounts of joy and celebration and conflict and study and argument. People have so many different ideas of what happened and how it happened. You can read great tomes in which people are arguing about how many angels were in the tomb – was it one or was it two – and which gospel is the right one and all of those sorts of things.

But I think that misses the point altogether. The power of Easter, of the Resurrection, is summed up in two points. One, Jesus is alive. Jesus is alive. Number two, Jesus is Lord. And these two points were made much more clear to me, having spent this week looking at the book, "The Last Week", by Marcus Borg and Dom Crossan. They take a day-by-day commentary of Holy Week and Easter. The focus on those two points – Jesus is alive and Jesus is Lord – is central to our understanding of the Resurrection.

First, Jesus is alive. What do we mean by that? Well, I don't think it means that there's a two thousand year old Jewish man sitting on the beach in Florida. Well, maybe there is, but it's not Jesus! It's not Jesus, it's not that kind of being alive. It's not just this wizened, shriveled up two thousand year old person stashed away someplace, living on a cloud (or on a beach in Florida) or wherever. It's not that kind of being alive.

It's also not just being alive in our memories. Oh, we have warm fuzzy memories about hearing Jesus stories when we were little kids and we associate that with the Easter Bunny and that makes us feel good. It's not talking about that, either.

When we say that Jesus is alive, we say that Jesus is alive in the way in which those first followers experienced a life-changing exposure to/appearance of... the word that is used in I think all the gospels is **appeared** to. It changed their lives.

Those people went from being these bumblers who always seemed to be getting it wrong, always seemed to be stumbling, to the people who, in the post-Easter world were transformed into those dynamos who are attributed with spreading the good news of Jesus. Not just in the Mediterranean basin, but into the horn of Africa, into India, into Central Asia, possibly into Britain. Life transforming, empowerment.

And people over the ages have had similar experiences. Sometimes there were the sort of transfiguration mountain-top experience, but sometimes they were quiet, subtle. At the same time, transformative experiences that opened those people to something deeper and greater than themselves. Not just fond memories of stories, but a lived experience of the risen Christ.

That leads us to the second point, that Jesus is Lord.

Those first-century Christians, those first followers who were declaring that Jesus is Lord, were committing treasonous acts. They lived in the world of the Roman Empire. There was one lord in the Roman Empire, and that lord was Caesar. And anybody who says otherwise ends up nailed to a cross on a hill somewhere, which was the penalty that was reserved for political dissidents. And Jesus was certainly one of those.

Those first-century Christians had been empowered by their experience of the risen Christ to have the courage to stand up in the midst of the Roman Empire and declare that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar. That the kingdom of heaven is their choice, not the Roman Empire. The kingdom that Jesus proclaimed was one of radical egalitarianism, based on all God's people being created in the Divine image. All God's people. Not just those at the top. *All* God's people.

[This] flew right in the face of Roman national theology, which held that the emperor was the son of god because by right of Julius Caesar's will, Augustus Caesar was his son. And when the senate declared Julius Caesar to be a god, Augustus Caesar became a son of god. And thus he was name – Son of God; The Bringer of Peace to the World. The Pax Romana. But the Pax Romana is that kind of peace that one experiences when a Roman Centurion has his boot on your neck. Things become very quiet and peaceful when you have a boot on your neck.

But the peace that Jesus spoke about in the reign of God was another kind of peace. It was a peace that comes in seeing God in one another and recognizing the Christ in one another. And seeing all of us as created in the Divine image. That all of us should have equal access to God's creation and benefits of that. That all of us have equal access to all of the fruits of God's creation. Not just those who happen to be born into a particular family.

So over the centuries the followers of Christ have had this struggle going on because The Church has, since the fourth century under Constantine, too often become a tool of oppression. Has been the legitimizer of the systems of oppression. Whenever empire is spreading religion, you can bet that it's being used as a tool to legitimize the oppression that comes with that empire. Whether it was the Holy Roman Empire, the Spanish Empire in the New World, the British Empire, or anybody else's Empire.

We have this constant struggle to take the empowerment that we receive as being united in Christ in his death and his resurrection through our baptism. We are empowered to stand against the Caesars of our days. To stand against all the ways in which we collude in oppressing the poor. All the ways in which we collude in oppressing women. All the ways in which we collude in oppressing sexual minorities. All the ways in which we collude in oppression of any kind. When we do not stand against the forces of oppression, whether it's called biblical morality or anything else, we collude with Caesar.

The Resurrection gives us the power to stand against evil. And oppression, no matter how we dress it up, is evil. When we go to war in the name of Jesus to protect ourselves we collude with evil.

The Resurrection gives us the authority, just as it gave the authority to those first apostles, to stand against all the forces of oppression. It requires that transformed heart to be able to do that, because the easiest way to get sucked into those systems of oppression is to take up arms against them. When they came to arrest Jesus in Gethsemane and Peter pulls his sword to defend Jesus he says, "Put it away." Put it away. There are some things that are more important than physical survival. The Resurrection shows us that the worst that oppression can do to us is kill us. And Jesus is saying through the Resurrection, "Gimme your best shot, sucker." He rises beyond that. He shows us that we need not fear oppressors. We need not be oppressors out of fear.

The Jesus who became the Christ is calling us into a new day. The Resurrection is a new dawn, a new day, and that day is still dawning. We still haven't quite got the full ray of the sun. We're still waiting. Maybe this year. Maybe this Easter is the time when we have the audacity to stand up for the resurrection as Easter People and be co-creators of the reign of God.

Amen.