

Easter Day
8/4/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:34 - 43

Psalm 118:1 -2, 14 - 24

I Corinthians 15:19 - 26

John 20:1 - 18

Risen indeed!

The Resurrection of Jesus is a critical chapter in a long story that reaches from the beginning of the time to its fulfilment. Although the modern mind has many questions about the facts of this event, the meaning resounds throughout the New Testament, and the age old witness of the Church. Nigel Watson says the accounts of the resurrection in the New Testament are not factual accounts or artless reminiscences, they are essays in persuasion. If we find ourselves persuaded it affects the entire way we look at history and our life in the world. The Resurrection witness is that there are forces in the cosmos, which compete with God, and God makes an end of them. God does this, not through violence or evil means, but through the power of merciful, suffering love manifest in Jesus. The Resurrection is more than a miracle. It is a sign that breaks into our history to reveal God's greater purposes for the world. By this closed worlds are broken open, old perceptions of what is possible are shattered, new relationships are formed and we are set free to step into a future marked by promise and hope. Not only does the Resurrection challenge all that we know about life in the world, it makes possible a new style of life.

When Jesus died his disciples had left in disillusionment, doubt and fear. The initial events of Easter Day show that there was no foundational faith among them. If this had not changed the story would never have got out. The process of coming to faith is what we see in John. Mary Magdalene comes to the garden in the dark, which in John is always a sign of unfaith. Seeing the stone had been removed she did not automatically think of what it said in the scriptures. She thought of grave robbers, probably from amongst those who put him to death. "They" had taken Jesus away, and "we" the disciples, do not know where he is. The visit of Peter and John, who also do not yet understand the scriptures, highlights the irony that the disciples indeed do not know where he is, nor are they able to read the sign in the grave clothes, carefully folded up. No grave robber would act like this. Furthermore in John the point where the leaders resolved to kill Jesus was when he raised Lazarus from death. When Jesus called Lazarus to come out from the tomb he did so, with the grave clothes still around him. We wonder how he would walk, but what it means is that Lazarus was raised, but not finally liberated from death. With Jesus it is different. The folded grave cloths are a sign, carefully placed, which witness that Jesus no is longer constrained by the bands of death or the tomb. John says this promise had already been witnessed to in scripture, but the disciples did not yet understand. The beloved disciple seems to accept that the tomb is empty, but the men went home with no recognition of resurrection. Nothing they had seen or heard persuaded them.

Mary Magdalene, a foundational member of the Early Church, weeping, looks at the tomb again. When the angels asked the reason for her sorrow Mary repeats her belief that grave robbers had plundered the tomb. The angels in white clothes are a symbol of

the heavenly world, a further sign that God has entered the story. But Mary is still locked in her grief.

The encounter with the gardener has been a favourite in Christian tradition. On one hand it reflects an alternative story circulated by those who were critical of the first Christians' belief about the reason for the empty tomb. But the early Church turned this detractor into a positive by saying the one who met Mary was indeed the true, life-giving nurturer of the Great Garden of God. Just as in the beginning God came seeking Adam in the Garden, so now Jesus seeks Mary, and calls her by name. We know how important that is. And it was persuasive.

In the intimacy of the exchange between Jesus and Mary John goes out of his way to show that the Risen One revealed himself to the one who sought him, and a new and enduring relationship was created. Named by Jesus Mary responds with "teacher" which is like a confession of faith. Her doubt and grief fell away. The Good Shepherd knows his sheep, and his sheep know his voice. Mary is the first among the witnesses to the Resurrection. After that everything changed.

The following section is about transition and transcendence. Mary has been given a glimpse of what it means that Jesus has been raised up, not just on the Cross but to the right hand of God. But she must live by this new vision and not cling to the Jesus she knew. Her relationship with Jesus is transformed, not because she had some new thought, but because the Risen One called her by name and shattered her previous view of life. Mary "saw the Lord" in the deepest sense. Mary was instructed to tell the disciples who here are referred to for the first time as "Brethren". The Risen and Ascending One names them as his community. He no longer stands in the same place as them. But the good news is the disciples are now linked to him in a special way.

Mary is the first among the disciples. In the coming to birth of her faith, the seed of resurrection faith was planted. What was in one came to be shared by many. Since then the Spirit of the Resurrected Christ has raised up many others to live in the promise and hope that death has been and will be overcome. When this hope and promise comes to birth amongst us, we become united with Jesus in his risen life, and through us his work of merciful love goes on in the world.

Between 1917 and 1925 the people of Armenia suffered genocide at the hands of the Turks. This is one of the unsung atrocities in the history of the world. Little mentioned in history books, discussion of the matter is suppressed in Turkey. **Hram Dink** was an Armenian journalist working in Turkey who spoke out about the Armenian genocide. A few months ago he paid the price. He was murdered, perhaps by government forces. At his funeral hundreds and thousands of people rallied by torchlight to protest over his murder and the curtailment of freedom and justice it represented. A journalist went into the crowd to speak to the people. He asked: "What are you doing here?" They said: "We are all Hram Dink." The spirit of one who suffered and died had raised up many to protest his death and continue his work in the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said the Church is Christ existing as community in the world today. At Easter the Church declares Christ is Risen! When people are persuaded by this message and give themselves to live in the spirit of merciful love, they become Christ's presence in the world today. When that happens, Christ has risen indeed!

