

Easter 2
19/4/2020

Mark the Evangelist

1 Peter 1:1-13
Psalm 16
John 20:19-31

A living hope

In a sentence

The resurrection gospel is hope not merely from the past or for the future, but a call to live fully the lives given us here and now.

Christ is risen – he is risen indeed!

What does this ancient affirmation *mean*?

We noted last week that the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus was something which was very much dependent upon the context within which it was first experienced.

The context immediate to Easter morning would have been the circle of the disciples themselves – the men and women who knew him, who were devastated by his death and for whom his unexpected return was both astounding and sheer joy. In the simple declaration, ‘Jesus is risen’, the emphasis falls at this point on the ‘*risen*’. He who was lost is *found*, he who was dead is *alive again*: Go and tell his disciples, he is *risen*.

The proclamation of the gospel then moved into a wider context – that of first century Judaism itself. Here the emphasis shifts from ‘risen’ to ‘is’: Jesus *is* risen. Jesus’ resurrection is now not merely surprising but *is of consequence*. It matters that, a resurrection *has* taken place because of the broader religious context within which Jesus’ resurrection is first declared. First century apocalyptic thought linked resurrection with the end of the world and the rectifying judgement of God. To speak of a person having been raised in the way in which Jesus was raised was to prompt thoughts about the end of the world.

We noted last week that the connection between a resurrection and the culmination of all things was quite specific to that context. Beyond the edges of Palestine such a connection would have been missed and talk about a resurrection would raise different questions.

But the gospel didn’t need to move in space for the resurrection to have to be stretched into new and deeper meaning. Even for those first Jewish believers who could make an ‘end of world’ connection to the resurrection of Jesus, *the simple passage of time* required a different way of speaking about the resurrection, a different set of associations with the message. For the end did not come as expected, so that the meaning of ‘end’ itself had to be thickened, and so also the perceived meaning of what pointed to that end had to change: the meaning of the resurrection itself.

While Peter begins the letter with joyous celebration of the ‘great mercy’ God has given us in the birthing of a ‘living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead’ (v.3), the resurrection *per se* fades from immediate view as ‘various trials’ (v.6) come to the fore in the letter. In fact, as the letter unfolds, we hear that these trials are quite arduous, being a matter of persecution of those who – on account of their ‘living hope’ – find themselves strangely ‘exiles’ and ‘aliens’ in a place in which they were

once quite at home (1.1,17; 2.11). The ‘end’ of the resurrection gives way to the ‘middle’ of extended – and *painful* – history.

The ‘living hope’ Peter refers to here cannot be reduced to what resurrection is typically reduced to: the affirmation that there is ‘life after death’. If this is all that Peter means, then we might wonder why there is so much tension between these Christians and their local community. That I hold there to be life after death – at least life for *me* – is not the kind of thing for which a community would be actively persecuted.

As the letter unfolds, we will hear that the tension is not because of a mere ‘belief’ but because of different *behaviour* among the new Christians: they now won’t do some of the things they used to do. Peter links, then, the ‘living hope’ springing from the resurrection of Jesus to a particular – and culturally new – *way of being*. More strongly than that, he sees the very *possibility* of such a different mode of behaviour as *springing from* the resurrection:

...[God] has given us a new birth into a living hope *through* the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...

The resurrection of Jesus, then, is no mere thing in itself – an event which we do or do not believe in. It is also no mere ‘message’ about the end times, these end times being a new given towards which we might order ourselves. The ‘living hope’ which the resurrection effects is decidedly social and political. It affects behaviour and so changes relationships. This will be experienced as being for the better or for the worse, according to which particular behaviours are being changed and who is affected by them. As it happens, the focus of Peter’s letter is on the experience – in the culture – that the Christians are changed for the worse.

Be that as it may, Peter reminds us that it is the resurrection of Jesus which is at the heart of the matter – which caused the behavioural ‘problem’. If the end-time meaning of the resurrection was moderated as the gospel moved into new cultures and languages (new *times*) with their own meaning systems and associations, *the person of Jesus himself does not diminish*. It is the link of resurrection-talk to *Jesus* which is crucial for the New Testament.

And so the emphasis in the simple proclamation, ‘Jesus is risen’, makes a final social and political shift to the first word: ‘*Jesus* is risen’.

We saw that the ‘risen’ is the sign itself – the ‘*pay attention*’ to this. We saw then that the ‘is’ is the ‘weight’ of what is declared – this is *determinative*. It has to do with the whole, the *goal* of all things.

And now we see that the ‘Jesus’ is the *content*. The end is come in the *person* of Jesus: Jesus is the goal, the purpose and so the appropriate mode of all things. This is to say, what happens to Jesus becomes in the resurrection the mark of what will happen to us.

What is discovered by Peter’s congregation is that this includes also what happens to Jesus *before* the resurrection. The resurrection is a *vindication* of all that Jesus was. And so we will hear Peter draw a connection between suffering and glory which will be both a challenge and a relief – both then and now.

But it is enough now simply to be reminded that the ‘living hope’ of the resurrection gospel is not a fixation on an event long past, closed in on itself. And it is not a wish about a distant future, far enough away that we cannot reasonably take it into account.

The resurrection of Jesus has to do precisely with where we find ourselves right now. It is the significance of one life for all lives:

one life as the way of being to which all God's people are called in a world in which we will know suffering;

one life as the source and goal of all;

one life as joy for all.

If Jesus is Lord – which is to say, if Jesus is risen – life in the thick of things cannot be merely what we think we see to be happening.

For the resurrection points to the cross, and the cross points marks God's being in the very midst of our lives – in joy and in sorrow – calling and carrying us to richer and deeper humanity with each other, in God.

These are things, Peter says, even the angel long to look into.

Let us then, in words and deeds, look with them, and learn, and love, and live.

Amen.
