

Easter Day
24/04/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 10:34 – 43

Psalm 118

Colossians 3:1 – 4

Matthew 28:1 – 10

Christ is risen! A seismic event that re-shapes our way of being in the world.

“As the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake... [28:1-2]. This Easter, like no other, we have some sense of what this experience may have been like, as terrifying visions of what has happened recently in Christ Church, Japan and other parts of the world have been relayed to us. Unprecedented seismic events have left us awestruck at the power of nature, while at the same time they have heightened our sense of insecurity because, compared to these events, the power of human intelligence and engineering appears so limited and fragile. Will we allow these earthquakes to reshape our way of being in the world? Will we develop a new vision of how life is to be lived and supported so that people can live securely and life will be preserved?

For Matthew the Resurrection of Jesus is a seismic event that does have the power to reshape our way of being in the world. Here we are dealing with God, present to us in an event that transcends and transforms our understanding. Among the four evangelists Matthew comes the closest to giving a description of the Resurrection itself, but it is impossible to get behind the biblical material to the provable facts so beloved of our scientifically minded age. The Gospel writers knew that when it comes to experiencing transcendent reality it is possible to experience the fact, but still not embrace the faith of the disciples. The guards at the tomb were filled with paralysing fear and later, perhaps to protect their own backs, promoted a story about body snatching, which is repeated even to the present day. The paradox is that what the New Testament writers are telling us about will always remain out of reach.

The Resurrection narratives are not history, or science, or biography. They are preaching, words of faith that declare a conviction: a truth about life. They invite us to enter into that truth, which is based on a relationship of trust in Jesus. They want us to understand that Jesus' resurrection to new life was testimony to the fact that in him, who had been rejected and crucified by us, God embraced and overcame all that Evil could do. This news is not just one more event in the life of Jesus it is the basis of the whole New Testament. Once understood, this news has transformative power for our life in the world.

In Matthew's narrative the first day of the week was dawning. This is an allusion to the first day of Creation. The darkness, symbol of unfaith, was slowly turning to light also echoing the first day of Creation, but a new act of creativity was about to emerge. The seismic events that follow: the earthquake, the angel as brilliant as lightning, the rolling away of the stone and sitting on it, all point to the revelation of an event with cosmic implications. The earth was shaken, the world was changed and a new order was breaking in.

The resurrection of Jesus is central to all this activity. This is not the restoration to life we saw in Lazarus, who was bound to die again. Matthew is pointing to a new act of creation in which Jesus is lifted up beyond the dominion of death to share the presence and power of God. He has entered into a new, deathless life. This notion relates to what was known in Jewish literature about resurrection, but goes beyond it. It is invariably associated with the dawn of the coming of the Kingdom of God: the end time of Jewish expectation. Matthew is very clear God has said YES to Jesus, and has made him part of the powers of creation itself that, in him have broken into our life. That is why, at the end of this Chapter Jesus says: “All authority has been given to me”, and “I am with you always to the end of the age.”

The angel and Jesus tell the women to pass the news to the disciples and to meet in Galilee. It is part of Matthew’s message that women are the first witnesses and the first to pass on the news. Women, whose testimony was not acceptable in a court of law had the privilege of speaking first of what God had done in the world. Jesus came to the women, and his disciples, in their grief and alienation to name them as his friends, and he calls them to join him in making God present in Galilee, the place where in his historic ministry he made God present in his words, his communion with sinners, and his healing touch. Now Galilee was a district settled by Gentiles and at the end of this chapter it becomes a launching pad for a mission to the uttermost parts of the earth. The disciples of Jesus, and we who follow him today, are called to follow him into new pathways of life and service in his name.

In his book *Theology of Hope* Jurgen Moltmann argues that faith in the resurrection implies a new vision of human destiny. “Those who hope in Christ” he says, “can no longer put up with reality as it is. Peace with God means conflict with the world, for the goad of the promised future stabs into the flesh of the unfulfilled present” [Quoted, Pridmore, *The Word...* p 123].

In February 1977 the Archbishop of Uganda had a meeting with Idi Amin, whose murderous regime he had outspokenly opposed. After the meeting the Archbishop was driven away, along with two government ministers. Uganda radio announced the three had been arrested, and the following morning it was stated they had died in a car accident. In fact Idi Amin had ordered they be shot. A funeral service planned for the following Sunday was forbidden and the Archbishop’s body was not released. Nevertheless, thousands gathered at the Cathedral and the service went ahead around an open grave. At the graveside the Archbishop’s successor repeated the message of the angel in Matthew: “He is not here, he is risen!” [Pridmore, *The Word...* p 122].

The resurrection is not just another good idea of ours, or a belief in the present strengths and capacities of the church. That Jesus is not here, but has risen means he is not confined to anything we know. That Jesus is not here but has gone on before us into Galilee means he has gone before us into life, life that transcends death. In the joy of knowing this truth, we are free to follow him into life as well. Christ is risen! Alleluia!
