

Easter Day
27/3/2016

Mark the Evangelist

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Psalm 118

Luke 24:1-12

Smile

The past was once a living place, but it is now the place of the dead. The dead *do* linger for while in our present – in our hearts and memories – but our hearts and memories will themselves one day die. *Our* present will one day be the oblivion – the *forgotten-ness* – of the past.

With that happy introduction, we signal that a little realism about death is important, if talk about resurrection is going to be worth the effort, even – or especially – on Easter Day!

In our gospel reading this morning, it is to the past – the place of the dead – that the women go to find what remains of Jesus, having started on his own way into oblivion. But when they arrive at the tomb, they are greeted by a couple of angels. We can forget that they're angels, and simply focus on what is said: "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen." The women go into the past to meet Jesus where they thought they left him. But they find that he's no longer there, but is already moving out ahead of them.

Of course, we are invited to take this assertion at face value. It may in fact be that Jesus is still there, in the past, but having managed to linger even to today – much longer than any of us ever will – but still on his way to fading into forgotten-ness. We can't really *know* that is, or is not the case. What we can do is ask what is implied by the proclamation that he is, in fact, no longer dead.

This requires that we push our realism about death a little further. The dead, are dead, are dead. This is more easily said than thought. We continue to want to ascribe to the dead attributes of the living. And so we are tempted to imagine that they are in the next room, or standing quietly next to us, and still not much different from us, other than being on "another plane".

But the dead are not subjects – doing or wanting as we do. They are objects (if anything), eventually to be submerged under time's tide. And so, for example, the dead do not prefer to be alive. They don't "prefer" *anything*; this is what dead means. Death – the last and most powerful of enemies, renders its victims wholly powerless to change their situation, or even to want to. Jesus, too.

Whatever resurrection is, it is "un-" this. But what does it mean for resurrection talk if the dead have no *interest* in being alive (or being dead, for that matter), *and yet* might then be raised? Perhaps surprisingly, it means that *nothing is gained* for anyone who is raised from the dead, at least as far as *they* are concerned. This is because the dead are not aware of lacking anything; they are dead and do not desire to live.

Perhaps this is why the risen Jesus never seems to smile. His resurrection is no reward, not even a release. He was dead, and so he didn't *want* or need anything. He was dead, and then he wasn't. There might have been a lot of smiling going on in the resurrection scenes, but it is not necessary that *Jesus* himself smile, for the resurrection to do its work. Being not-dead is what now what Jesus now *does*, not how he feels.

And this is why when Christians, from St Paul onwards, have thought about resurrection, they have thought about creation out of nothing (cf. Romans 4.17). A thing created out of nothing does not say, “I so hated being nothing; being something is so much better!” Only God can tell the difference between its now being “there” and its not having been there. The resurrection, then, is a kind of shift in God’s own experience as significant as the shift which is the very creation of the world.

Yet, there is a difference between resurrection and being created out of nothing. You do not *remember* what was not but now is: it simply starts and makes its first impression upon us. But what was, and then was not, and now again is *remembered* as being the same thing. And so the kind of creation which is resurrection of Jesus was is a *restoration*: a being-restored *to*. The risen Jesus need not smile because he did not lose himself; the disciples lost him. It was the disciples’ mouths filled with laughter, *their* tongues loosed by joy (Psalm 126 – sung last night).

This kind of resurrection, then, is always about, or oriented toward, someone other than the person who has died. This “someone other” is the one who remembers, who still holds in mind those lost to death, keeping oblivion – forgotten-ness – at bay. This is the one who mourns, who regrets, who longs. Any one of us can do this remembering work for a while, until we ourselves are the ones to be remembered, and those we remembered move a step closer to being wholly forgotten.

But it is God in whose memory nothing is lost. It is this that the resurrection signifies: that God wills not to forget, not to allow anything to fade into oblivion. God wills that what was not, and then was, will not then be fade into forgotten-ness; and what God wills, is.

If there is a resurrection like the one said to have happened to Jesus – such that Jesus is no longer among the dead, *merely* remembered – then we have now not merely remembering but the possibility of *remembrance*: the being present again of the reality of what was lost, a kind of re-creation.

As we gather week after week, we participate in just such a remembrance – the very breaking of the bread and blessing of the cup, “doing this” as Jesus commanded for the “remembrance” of him.

This we do as a community of those present, with those who have gone before and those yet to come. Jesus is remembranced – risen – among us as we join around the table which binds us together, as we are made to remember *each other*.

To gather around *this* table is to be invited to look at who stands there with us, and to smile. We smile here, not because they might have smiled at us or because it’s a positive-attitude thing to do. We smile here because we have seen them again, or perhaps even for the first time: who was lost, is found; who was dead, is alive; who was forgotten is remembered. This is the smile of the disciples on Easter Day.

Then, finally comes Jesus’ own smile – not that he was dead and is now alive, but the smile which is *itself* a life restored: the smile which comes when I know that I have been missed, because I can see it on the beaming faces of the people who loved me.

On Easter Day God smiled, remembering Jesus, remembering us. Why do you seek the living among the dead?

Smile.
