

Easter Sunday
1/4/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Psalm 118
John 20:1-18

Resurrection as forgiveness

‘Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb,’ came to the place of the dead. There was nothing left to do but what is always done for the dead, and Magdalene came for that. She discovered, on this occasion, that it was not a place of the dead, after all.

This is the *story* of the resurrection of Jesus, and it is one the church has believed since that day. But *how* we believe the story is crucial, for it is surely unbelievable – *so* unbelievable that even belief will not always believe it well.

Let us, then, for argument’s sake, allow that Magdalene is addressed by a living Jesus after his death on the cross, in the way described by John. How do *we* enter into this experience, today?

What typically happens for us at this distance is that the location of the resurrection remains in the *story* – *in the past*. Whereas Magdalene returned to the tomb for the dead Jesus, we tend to go to the story, Magdalene-at-the-tomb, for the risen Jesus. She looks for him in the tomb, we look for him around her and what is said to have happened to her (and to the others). Our approach to the resurrection, then, ends up being quite close to Magdalene’s approach to the crucified Jesus, a sorry march to the past, to the place of the dead. The only difference is that for her it is Jesus who is entombed and a thing of the past while for us it is the *resurrection* itself. And now we are surely lost, because a past resurrection is no more useful to us than a corpse. In the end, we have to entomb them both for the sake of our own safety. Thus the confession ‘on the third day he rose again’ is uncomfortable, even on the lips of many Christians.

All of this brings us to the need for a subtle but important distinction: the church does not believe in the resurrection of Jesus; we believe in the continuing presence and address of the crucified Lord. The past event of any purported resuscitation may be of no interest except as a curiosity: *so what* if Jesus or someone else stopped being dead? But if the content of the resurrection is that Jesus continues to address and engage with his disciples, then we are dealing with something wholly new.

The distinction the resurrection in itself and the continuing presence of the crucified Lord can be put differently: when we speak of Easter we speak not of the idea of a general resurrection from a general death. We speak not of the *possibility* of resurrection in itself, although this is where we nearly always start. The specifics of the story are crucial (note, in passing, that ‘crucial’ literally means ‘of a cross’): it is the crucified Jesus who is raised, and no other.

This is to say that the risen Jesus only has interest for us if the *crucified* Jesus does; the resurrection only *does* something to or for us if the cross did.

What then, did the crucifixion do? In the light of Easter, it manifested the misunderstanding and fear which arises in God’s people when God comes too close. ‘Crucify him’ becomes the imperative, and it is done. The resurrection of Jesus answers not his mere death but our rejection of him, of which his death on the cross is a sign.

All of this is important because it moves the resurrection out of the realm of a magical subversion of natural law into the sphere of history: how we relate to each other and to God. The resurrection now becomes an answer to an answer, a judgement of a judgement. It is the rebuttal of the cross, understood to be the failure of *Jesus*, for that is what it signified to his friends and enemies alike. The resurrection is the re-presentation of the cross, now understood as the failure of *God's people*.

What passes between Good Friday and Easter is, then, not death and life in themselves, understood as the beating, and cessation, and beating again of a heart. What passes between Good Friday and Easter is sin and forgiveness.

To say that Jesus is risen – in the way that his is risen *in the gospels* – is to say that we might be raised, which is to say that we might be *forgiven*. Life after death is not for Christian faith primarily about what happens after we die; it is about the possibility of forgiveness, the awakening of the walking dead.

And so, to return to our reading this morning, Magdalene hears from Jesus: ‘Do not hold on to me’. To paraphrase: ‘What has happened is not that you have gotten me back, lucky you, give me hug!’ What has happened is that I embrace you and others again, despite it all – despite the fear, the anxiety, the distrust, the over-enthusiasm, the opposition, the despair. I ascend to my Father *and your Father*, to my God and *your God*. We are restored, reconnected, reconciled to each other, in God.

Here the catastrophe of Good Friday is overcome, here the fearful disciples are forgiven and re-embraced. Here the great prayer of Jesus that the disciples be one in him (John 17), in God, is answered.

And so Magdalene runs to the disciples with the message, I have seen the Lord. He takes us back. And God is ours.

And ours.
