

Easter Vigil
March 31, 2018
A Vision of Easter

What is your vision of Easter? Colored eggs, bunnies, jelly beans? That's the secular side.

How about: The Death of Death, Rising Up with Christ, the Promise of Life. Our whole Christian year reaches towards the moment of the Easter Vigil when we proclaim, "He is Risen!"

Holy Week takes us from the reading of the Passion on Palm Sunday, through the Way of the Cross, the Maundy Thursday representation of the Last Supper, and Good Friday when we pause to linger in the reality of Jesus' death.

Through these liturgies we experience a mystical connection with these long ago events, and we do not rush to the hope which we know is coming. Tonight, as we light the new fire, we remember that just as death touches all people, the promise of new life is offered to *all* people.

Noted scholar and theologian John Dominic Crossan has a soon to be released book, *Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision*. In a short article in Christian Century magazine (Jan. 2018), he summarizes some of his key points.

Crossan describes the art frescoes at an 11th century Byzantine church in Cappadocia called the Dark Church. In Eastern art, Crossan says, the resurrection is communal, an event involving all humanity. Iconographic paintings show the Christ grasping the hands of Adam and Eve, and all of humanity following: resurrection as universal event. Combining past, present and future in its Easter vision.

In Western art, Crossan says,

"Christ rises triumphantly and magnificently – but utterly alone. The guards of the tomb may be shown asleep or awake, but nobody else rises in, by or with Christ. Whatever may be implied about humanity's future by this image of resurrection, it says nothing about humanity's past."

No one else rises with the Christ. The Resurrection is an individual event in Western art. Many strive – as Brian touched lightly in his e-news reflection this week, and N.T. Wright in detail in his book *Surprised by Hope* – many strive to affirm the historicity of the Resurrection of Christ. An actual event, and not a metaphor.

The Scripture does not describe the actual moment of resurrection. There is no direct account.

Two thousand years later, we Christians are left to imagine - individual or communal? For us, the resurrection is not a literal vision. However real the historical event, our vision of the

Resurrection is and remains a metaphorical vision. Why the churches of the east and west developed different Easter visions, is a long topic.

Crossan says,

[While] Paul's pharisaic tradition imagined individual *ascension* for particularly holy individuals like Enoch, Moses or Elijah, it never imagined *resurrection* as an individual event. Within biblical Judaism, resurrection was always corporate, communal and universal. At its origins, the concept of resurrection – as distinct from ascension – involved the whole human race.

I look out at this world, tonight, and see that it is more like the world of the crucifixion than the promise of the resurrection. We live with escalating violence. Civilization has lived with escalating violence from the inaugural mention of sin in Genesis 4:7. We are deluded into believing that peace on earth will result from total global control, and that only some form of ultimate violence will interrupt the trajectory. And so we build more weapons. We build more lethal weapons.

Does anyone build a less lethal weapon? Perhaps a taser would be an example. Our children are marching, begging us 'older wiser adults who are in charge' to at the very least take away the weapons used in mass shootings.

More than twenty thousand Palestinians massed on the border of Gaza with Israel yesterday. Many were killed, over 700 wounded. The people of Gaza have electricity less than four hours a day; there is a water shortage, and a severe humanitarian crisis. Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel battle on with guns and border walls.

Beyond the violence and struggle to gain control over one another, is there a glimpse of resurrection, of the promise of new life in these events? An Easter vision that involves humanity – both Palestinians and Israelis?

I wonder about our Easter vision that proclaims the covenant of reconciliation in the Paschal mystery.

Jesus lived by the obvious– and perhaps the only – answer to escalating violence: communal non-violent resistance. Jesus died from incarnating that answer.

The disciples left; Peter denied knowing Jesus. We share an historical sense of shame – could they not have stayed with him? Rescued him?

Peter cut off the soldier's ear when they came to arrest Jesus; Peter was rebuked. *Put your sword away*, Jesus said. And thereafter, Jesus' companions refused to use violence, even to save him from the crucifixion. Think about it. Was that abandonment – or affirmation of Jesus'

message of non-violent resistance? The only Way, the most positive and obedient response the disciples could have made.

Inhaling, incorporating, the vision of Easter into our lives as universal resurrection – new life that involves all of humanity – has everything to do with our call as disciples to help *transform* humanity away from its seemingly inexorable path of self-destruction by escalating violence.

Does the Easter vision of communal resurrection require us to put away our swords?

The Gospel of Mark's indirect story of the resurrection is wholly unsatisfactory and seemingly incomplete. The disciples have mostly ran away. The women, confronted with the empty tomb, run away, too, and are scared to say anything to anyone. Mark depicts the extreme loss of hope, the end of *historical* possibility.

And then, the listener to the Gospel understands. Jesus has risen from the dead, and no one has seen him! The tomb is empty.

There is a new beginning beyond failed violence. Something that is not despair or defeat. Something is about to happen, God will do something more.

The early Christians made several attempts to add verses to Mark's Gospel – verses which suggested post-resurrection appearances 'to Mary Magdalen' and '*in another form to two of them as they were walking into the country.*' Cf, added verses of Mark 16:9-12].

Nearly 2000 years later, we experience Easter as the triumph of God. Because, faced with the abject failure of his people, God is not defeated. Hope rises.

Hope is gone, hope rises. Hope is gone, therefore I have hope. Hope that streams abundantly from our covenantal relationship with our God: steadfast love, mercy, faithfulness.

I recently read the story of man in his late fifties who had been released from prison after serving several years for involuntary manslaughter – drunk driving that ended in tragedy. He says,

Virtually everything in my life burned to the waterline. But I have realized that there's some great power in being around long enough to comprehend that no matter the damage we've done, a new door will open. No matter what age you are, staging a comeback is only a matter of taking the rest of your life seriously. [Donovan Webster]

Taking the rest of your life seriously. No matter the damage we have done, a new door will open. For all humanity.

Faith in resurrection is central to our tradition – and to Islam and to some movements of Judaism. The constant is the power of God over death..

Remember the open door of hope, the stone rolled away from the tomb, as we reach for the love and power of the resurrected Jesus.

Amen.

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