

Easter Day/Year B/09

A Daring Notion

*"he lived, he died, he was buried, he was raised, he appeared to us"*

These are the words and phrases that Paul employs in the second reading this morning from the First Letter to the Corinthians. It is a daring notion. It was the story they told, the tradition they maintained about the man they knew as Jesus of Nazareth.

Not only did they tell this story but they believed it, which makes the story such a daring notion. This was not just the story of Jesus. It was the story of those who believed in Jesus. In another sense, the believers also lived, died, were raised and lived again. Their lives had been transformed by their experience of Jesus. And now the same Jesus continued to live in their faithful presence. The story of the living, risen Jesus became the theme of their lives. It engendered within them courage to bear witness with their words and deeds (as we see in Peter's testimony to the Gentiles in Caesarea the Acts of the Apostles.) It drew them together as a spirit filled community bound by the love they shared, the love that Jesus loved them with, the love of God.

Mark is the earliest and the simplest of the Gospels. As with the other Gospel writers, Mark's purpose was not a historical one. Not at least as we think today of history, the objective recording of events as they actually happened. The Gospels are something distinctly different. And we make a serious misjudgement of what we read to simply accept the Gospel narratives as simple factual record. The Gospels certainly testify to the historical fact of a man called Jesus and to the following he generated in that particular time in history.

But history, as we generally think of it, was not the purpose of Mark's gospel or the others either. It has long been thought that the Gospel according to Mark served as a manuscript for preparation of candidates for baptism. It has a didactic quality to it. One could imagine new Christians studying this text, not to find out the historical facts but to become more intimately acquainted with the Jesus the earliest followers knew and believed in. Mark wanted them to know Jesus the Christ, the Messiah of God. So his narrative style, both earthy, grounded in everyday-ness, and miraculous, touching the realms of heaven, opened the hearts and imaginations of those who read to the spiritual reality of the living Christ.

But Mark also had a second purpose, also shared by the other gospel writers. It was to preserve the story that sustained the tradition of the

faith. Through his gospel narratives drawn from the early fellowship of Jesus' disciples, (people like Peter, for whom, it is believed, Mark was a scribe and disciple), Mark preserves the faith experiences of the disciples and followers of Jesus. His gospel sets into story the experiences of living and journeying with Jesus throughout the few years of his mission in Galilee and Judea.

It is in that perspective then that we hear this morning of the women coming to the tomb, very early on the morning after the Sabbath, and after the customary pause before the final preparation of the body for burial and entombment. They come with spices to wrap around Jesus' body. They come, in spite of the knowledge that the stone had already been rolled across the entrance, all the while wondering how they will get into the tomb. And they are surprised to see that the stone had been rolled away. Going into the tomb, they see to one side an enigmatic young man dressed in white robes. He tells them that Jesus is not here, that he has been raised, that they will see him again but in Galilee (as Jesus indicated earlier in the Gospel). The women are frightened by what they see and hear, and run away, telling no one because they are afraid.

*And ?? . . . Is that it? . . . Is that the end of the story?*

The bible version of Mark as we read it today has more, much of which is considered to have been added on, perhaps by someone who simply wasn't satisfied with the way Mark ended things so abruptly. Matthew and Luke and John go on to tell of other appearances and dramatic encounters with Jesus, even a splendid ascension into the realms of heaven after some weeks, but the earliest Gospel goes silent beyond this point.

It is interesting to note that the gospels are full of these sorts of enigmatic narratives, where the ending is left open. Many are about the people who encountered Jesus in his mission. We are left wondering what ever became of their lives after the encounter with this charismatic person.

Imagine that all we had was Mark's Gospel. We might be asking "Well, did the disciples and friends ever see Jesus again? What happened in Galilee? Was Jesus risen?" That becomes a matter of faith, faith in this story that Mark tells.

Faith is a curious human phenomenon. You can't logically argue yourself into believing something that is essentially a mystery. You don't believe the things of God because they make sense. That's why the world

has such a problem with Christian belief. The Easter story ends with a logical contradiction. *He died, he was buried, he rose again, he appeared to us.* Christian faith comes abruptly up against the empty tomb. What are we moved to believe about this story that pushes us beyond logic and common sense to faith?

One commentator on this resurrection narrative asked the question about Galilee. He thought that Galilee (which does not figure again in any of the early Christian writings, except perhaps in John's Gospel where Jesus meets his fishermen friends on the shore and shares breakfast with them) may refer to something much larger than the geographical region west of the Sea of Galilee and north of Samaria. Rather Galilee refers more broadly to the place of the everyday, the mundane. After the astonishing revelation of the Christ in the man Jesus, and the three years of mission proclaiming and living out the mission of proclaiming the kingdom of God, the disciples had to go home. There was laundry to do and dishes to wash and kids to get off to school and repairs to the house.

That's what we go back to after our Easter worship. We go back to the Galilee of our own lives. "There you will see him, as he told you", said the young man who had run away naked when Jesus was arrested in Gethsemane, but now sits fully clothed in robes of white, newly baptized in the Lord's death and resurrection.

This is the astonishing promise of Mark's gospel. Jesus will meet us as we do the laundry, wash the dishes, shop for clothes for the kids, help the needy, encounter the stranger and the outcast, and testify in word and deed before the world of the faith that is within us.

- *The Rev. Canon Paul Kompass*