

FINDING MEANING IN THE CRUCIFIXION AND RESURRECTION



John 10:6 "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them. So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.'"

During the Season of Lent this year, I preached a long series of sermons about the life of Jesus. As we noted at the end of the series, the disciples appear surprised and dismayed in the Garden of Gethsemane when an angry mob suddenly appeared to arrest Jesus. According to Mark's Gospel, the disciples all forsook Jesus and fled (Mk. 14.50). And none of the disciples appear to have been expecting the resurrection either three days later. Poor Thomas has forever been labeled "the Doubter," but he was no more a doubter than the others, as we saw. None of them believed the testimony of the women at the sepulcher, or the two disciples on

the road to Emmaus, or Mary Magdalene, or even Peter, when they all reported having seen the resurrected Jesus.

The disciples of Jesus, in the end, were profoundly and emotionally overwhelmed by the events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. They were in shock. They were frightened and confused. They remained hiding behind those closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities for the next fifty days, according to the Book of Acts, until Pentecost came. That's about the same amount of time that we all have been in self-quarantine. And only after 50 days, only then were the disciples filled with the Holy Spirit and brave enough to go out into the streets for the first time and bear testimony to the things they had seen and witnessed with their own eyes.

And what did they say when they went out into the public square? What stories did they remember and share? How did they describe Jesus? What language and images did they use? Someday I want to develop a sermon series on the early Church's understanding of the meaning of the Crucifixion and Resurrection, for there were no uniform answers given here. Different individuals, in different ways, at different times, struggled to make sense of it all; struggled to understand how it happened, why it happened, and what it meant. We can see their confusion very clearly in the pages of the New Testament, as different authors

explore different language and images to explain what had occurred and what it meant for them, and for us.

As we saw during the Lenten series, during his lifetime Jesus was called many things, rabbi, teacher, Lord, prophet, friend, Son of Man, Son of God, and Christ or Messiah. While the Church has picked up these latter titles, that of Messiah and Son of God, they don't appear to have been clearly accepted by Jesus himself during his earthly ministry. And even so, the Jews disagreed with each other about exactly what those titles meant. You may remember earlier in Jerusalem, the crowd disputing with themselves, with one group declaring that the Messiah must be born in Bethlehem, while the other group held a different interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures, where an apocalyptic Messiah would come quickly out of nowhere, and no one would know where he was from. Some Jews saw the Messiah as a human king like David who would restore the fortunes of Israel, break them free from the Roman Empire and its domination, and herald in a reign of peace and prosperity as in the glory days of old. Other Jews were more influenced by Jewish apocalyptic literature of that time and envisioned one called "the Son of man" who in messianic terms would come down from heaven suddenly and herald in the long awaited Kingdom of God, of peace on earth and good will among mankind. And yet Jesus didn't really seem to fit either of these two archetypes, though his followers soon began to claim him as the Messiah and then scoured the Old

Testament for any Scriptural references that fit his life and could be claimed as Messianic, whether those verses were thought of as messianic previously or not.

St. Paul, our earliest source of extant Christian writings, was, as you will remember, a Pharisee, who at first arrested and jailed Christians on behalf of the Sanhedrin accusing them of blasphemy, at least until this conversion experience on the road to Damascus; Paul in his numerous later letters so connects the words Jesus and Christ together, that we can hardly separate them today. For Paul, Jesus was the Messiah, or Christ in Greek, but a Messiah, who fulfilled the Law and the Prophets for us, thus freeing ordinary men and women from trying to keep the Commandments and the Jewish Law, a particular concern to Pharisees. This was neither the envisioned Davidic Messiah to overcome Rome nor the apocalyptic Messiah to suddenly bring in a reign of peace. For Paul, the promised Kingdom of God was yet to come, but it would come soon.

Paul soon took this message to the Greek world, and soon welcomed Gentiles into the early Church, controversial as that was. These Greeks, however, were more familiar with and thus soon adopted the phrase "Son of God" to explain Jesus' uniqueness, and his special relationship with God the Father. Greek culture was full of sons of Gods. But for Jews, there was only one God, "Hear O Israel, the Lord thy God is one, and you have no other Gods

besides Him." Disputes quickly arose in the synagogues and early followers about how divine Jesus could be, while allowing his followers to still retain the ancient Jewish gift of monotheism. Four hundred years later the Church was still arguing about these things as they struggled to formulate and accept the Nicene Creed.

The writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, used an entirely different set of images to explain Jesus' death and resurrection. This author used the language, not of the Law like Paul the Pharisee, but the language and images of the Temple. Jesus was seen here as our great High Priest, offering the sacrifice of Atonement on our behalf, once and for all, replacing the need of repeated rituals in Jerusalem as Jesus became both priest and sacrifice, as the temple curtain was torn in two. And this view won even greater acceptance in the early Church when the Jewish temple was destroyed in the rebellion of 70 A.D. There was no need for the temple anymore, because we had Jesus.

The author of Matthew's Gospel, in different language and different images, portrayed Jesus as the New Moses, coming down from his Sermon on the Mount with the new Commandment, the commandment that we love another as he loved us. All of the synoptic Gospels, namely, Matthew, Mark and Luke, record Jesus' crucifixion as occurring on the Day of Passover, with the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples then was a Passover meal, and much of the language and imagery of that great Passover event in

the life of the Jewish people become language and imagery to explain and understand Jesus' death and resurrection. Followers of Jesus became then freed from the slavery of sin and death. Jesus becomes our Passover, where it is not the Angel of Death that moves from house to house that holy night, but the Holy Spirit of God that brings not death, but eternal life to us all.

The author of John's Gospel, however, records Jesus dying the Day before Passover, the so-called Day of Preparation, the day when the lambs were sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem for the Passover meals the next day. In John's Gospel, and interesting only among John's beloved Community, Jesus is called then "the lamb of God" who was sacrificed for us, for our sins, for our redemption. In Revelation, it is the Lamb that stands before the throne of God in heaven.

John's Gospel is clearly struggling to explain to his readers who Jesus was, and what his death and resurrection means. It was not an easy task, there was no easy answer to that question, so the author of John, I believe, puts words in Jesus' mouth. In John's Gospel, Jesus goes on and on at times with long theological discourses, with ideas and images that we don't find in the other three Gospels. This contrast between the way Jesus seems to speak in John's Gospel and the way Jesus talks in the first three Gospels is perhaps best exemplified by the "I am" statements, you know, the places where Jesus says "I am" and then adds some kind

of predicate; like, "I am the bread of life" or "I am the light of the world," "I am the resurrection and the life," "I am the vine," "I am the good shepherd," and "I am the gate." These are some of the most beloved sayings of Jesus, and yet none of these statements can be found anywhere else in the New Testament. The "I am" statements are found only in John's Gospel. This isn't how Jesus talks in the other Gospels; it is more about how John, the Gospel writer, talks about Jesus. John, it would appear to me is trying to explain to his readers who Jesus is, and trying to find the right words and right images to try to make clear what it all means for us.

Thus from the very beginning, Christians have been disagreeing with one another about exactly who Jesus was, and with what language we should use to describe him. Christians dispute amongst themselves even still. And there is still no agreement about exactly who Jesus was, or exactly what our titles for him mean. Nowadays the preacher on the street corner downtown will ask you pointblank if you have accepted Jesus Christ as 'your personal Lord and Savior', and he will have very specific meanings behind those words, and if you don't understand Jesus exactly like he understands him, then he will tell you that you are not saved. Other Christians will point to the Nicene Creed as the definitive statement of who Jesus was, and if you disagree with that, then you are not considered 'orthodox' (even though a large part of the

Christian Church has never accepted that Creed). Christians just cannot seem to agree about how to explain who Jesus was exactly, what his death and resurrection mean --- except in our hope for eternal life. This is the same struggle reflected with the first disciples, in their confusion about why Jesus was killed, and what it means for us, and what his unexpected resurrection portends.

But ultimately, ultimately, as a lover of Jesus, I am more interested in what Jesus really said, and in what Jesus really did, to reveal for us who Jesus really was. His true words and actions are, in my mind, better than any of the descriptions and explanations provided later by his beloved followers, which may explain my life long search for the historical Jesus and my lifelong struggle to follow Jesus, following in the Way of the Cross. In the end, I am more interested in following the religion of Jesus, rather than any of those later religions about Jesus.

AMEN.