

## Easter Sermon



Matthew 28.3 "The angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee.'"

Many years ago, shortly after 9/11, I was part of an interfaith group that organized a series of discussions to further awareness and appreciation of the Abrahamic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Each discussion

included a Jewish rabbi, an Islamic Iman, and a Christian minister, and the series was arranged around the rites and ceremonies of life, with the first one on initiation rites at birth, another on the passage from adolescence to adulthood, another on marriage ceremonies and family practices, and the last one on questions of death and afterlife.

I was asked to represent the Christian perspective at this last discussion, which centered around the question as to what happens to us when we die. The Islamic Iman went first on this occasion, and at that time, I was not as familiar with the Islamic traditions or practices as I am now. So, the Iman, I remember, began quoting various surahs from the Quran that I was simply unacquainted with. The language and the images of which he spoke were strange and foreign sounding to me. I remember the Imam talked a great deal about Paradise, which sounded a bit like heaven to me, though I believe he also mentioned the 72 virgins in paradise awaiting the true believer, which I had not heard before. (And I want you all to know that I am a true believer). In the end, I found that my mind began to drift away from the conversation as the Imam continued on and on, because the vocabulary and the illustrations were so strange and enigmatic and alien to me.

Then suddenly I began to wonder if that is what it is like for others when Christians began to quote verses from our

Scriptures or stories from the Bible, which non-Christians may be less familiar with. And I began to get nervous about what I had planned to say about the Resurrection, and so I put aside my papers for the moment.

Next, however, the Jewish rabbi took his turn, and revealed himself to be a biblically conservative Jew who believed that at the death, we humans simply return to the earth from which Adam was created, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The breath of God which gives life in the Jewish tradition, returns to God in death. If we live on in any way, the rabbi suggested, we live on only in the blessed memories of others and in the lives of our children, and thus the Jewish focus on the family and kindnesses to others, a mitzvah. That was a word I was familiar with, as a group from our local synagogue in Bridgeport, served the Tuesday Night Supper at my parish once a month, and we all became good friends. I remember that one of that group bought with her own money each month a big bag full of individual toiletries to hand out to our guests as they arrived on their week to serve; simple items such as soap, shampoo, toothbrushes, feminine products, deodorant, etc., because she knew that Food Stamps did not cover these items, which were considered by Social Services to be luxuries. So, this was her personal mitzvah, she told me, and I saw for myself

how she was loved and well-remembered by the guests at the suppers!

And so, at last it was time for me to speak. I had put aside the careful scriptural refutations which I had prepared to defend the Christian story of Jesus' Resurrection, and began to talk instead, a bit off the cuff for a while, about the long, long history of different cultures in different ways in different parts of the world supporting some belief that there is something more to life, after we die. Sometimes, I believe, such longings derive from simple grief, a straightforward refusal to believe that we might never, ever see our beloved ones again! Surely, I shall see my mother again someday, I have often thought? How could it not be so? In other cultures, life after death is imagined as required in order to secure justice, you know, that deep rooted belief we all seem to hold on to, that there is justice to be had in the end, where the poor and oppressed will finally be blessed, while the wicked oppressors and the rich get will their due. Lastly, I suspect there is just a love of life in so many of us that we inevitably hope that life never ends, that there is more somehow, somewhere, in heaven, in reincarnation, in another dimension somewhere, or in the shadowy ideas of the Jewish Sheol or the Greco-Roman Hades.

And so, I suggested that many of us are inevitably attracted to hints of any truth about an afterlife, that many of

us easily embrace stories of angels and ghosts, and voices from heaven, that seem to circulate here and there around the world and across the ages. We cling to tales of near-death experiences and miraculous healings. I personally have known several people who have told me of their own experiences of such things, and who have told me that they hold some opinion or some belief as a result, which they will not, cannot doubt, so powerful, and yet so mysterious, was the experience, that there has to be some truth behind it all, they say. I then told the audience that that is what I believe the earliest accounts of the Resurrection of Jesus were, that those stories must have some kind of truth behind them all. They are not, I believe, just born out of grief, or despair, or innocent hope.

There can be little doubt that Jesus really died. The Romans were very good at putting people to death, and the story of the breaking the legs of the thieves and piercing Jesus' side with a lance would seem to confirm his demise. The Romans were unlikely to let Joseph of Arimathea take the body down from the cross unless they were certain that Jesus was really, really dead. And yet we have this whole mysterious series of Resurrection appearances for several weeks thereafter from a variety of sources that haunt us still.

And this does not appear to be some great religious conspiracy as some sceptics suggest, for Jesus' disciples

themselves seem totally unprepared for this event and unbelieving of it as it unfolded. They weren't looking for the resurrection; they were hiding behind closed doors in fear of the Jewish authorities. What happened that first Easter morning so long ago was completely unexpected, as women came to the tomb not looking for a resurrection, but to finish the burial preparations that had been hurried on Friday night before the Sabbath. Indeed, each of the disciples who saw the Empty Tomb, thought first that the grave had been robbed, not that Jesus had been raised from the dead. Thus, it was a mystery, and the disciples telling of those stories are themselves evidence of the unexpectedness of Jesus' resurrection, and thus perhaps of its truth, for they cannot seem to get their story straight.

For the various Gospel accounts disagree with one another in detailing the Resurrection, time after time after time. For instance, in John's account, Mary Magdalene seems to go alone to the tomb on that first Easter morning. In Matthew's account, it is Mary Magdalene and Mary who go. Mark, however, adds Salome with the other two. And Luke names Joanna and says that even more unnamed women were present. In Mark's account, the women discover a young man, robed in white, who announces the resurrection. In Matthew's account, he is identified as an angel. In Luke's version, there are two angels. In the Fourth

Gospel, there are two angels and then Jesus himself appears, as he does later in Matthew.

When Mary Magdalene comes upon the Risen Jesus in John's Gospel, he specifically tells her not to touch him, but when the Risen Jesus appears to the doubting Thomas, he specifically invites him to put his fingers in the print of the nails, and to put his hand in his side. When the Risen Jesus appears to the disciples in Jerusalem, he scolds them for this disbelief, saying "Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And yet, when he appears to the two disciples on the Road to Emmaus, he is unrecognized at first until he breaks the bread at dinner, and then he suddenly vanishes out of sight, and elsewhere appears to walk through closed doors. In Luke's account the disciples are told that they will see the Resurrected Jesus in Galilee, while in John's and Matthew's account they see him in Jerusalem.

There is a total confusion in the retelling of this story, except for one fact, one undeniable fact, I think, namely, that God did something very powerful and very unexpected that first Easter morning, that God raised Jesus from the dead, in some fashion or another --- and that there is therefore, life after death, eternal life as the Church calls it. Those early Christians, sadly just like Christians today, will often

disagree amongst themselves about the facts, and will often disagree amongst themselves about what it all means. But because of the stories of those early disciples, and others like them, we can all remain united as Christians on this day in asserting our faith in God's mysterious power, and in affirming that there is indeed life after death, and that by following the way of Jesus, we can partake of that eternal life, as we proclaim boldly today in faith: Alleluia. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. AMEN.