Sermon for Easter Sunday Year B

Readings: Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

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John’s version of the Easter story is the dominant version which overshadows the other gospels because it is so full of wonderful details. There is so much contained within John’s account, it is difficult to know where to start and what to leave out, but this year I want to pause on a detail that is so small that it is usually overlooked. I am indebted to the scholar, N. T. Wright for this insight. He points out the significance of John 20:17:

Go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’

Wright makes the point that this is the first time Jesus refers to the Father as ‘your Father.’ Up to now, Jesus has referred to ‘the Father’ or ‘my Father’; but now, in the light of what Jesus has achieved through the cross, Jesus says to Mary and all other believers: the Father is ‘your Father.’ This fulfils John 1:12:

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become the children of God…’

In further support of this significant point, Jesus refers to the disciples as his ‘brothers’ – whereas up to this point, he has referred to them as ‘children’ (John 13:33).

What Jesus has accomplished on the cross is to mend the broken relationship between God and humankind. John is signalling that the world has now fundamentally changed because of Christ. Creation has been restored and those who believe are the first fruits of the new world.

Has hearing the Easter story changed your world? If not, you haven’t yet heard it properly, no matter how many Easters you have had.

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In Luke’s account of Peter preaching in Cornelius’ house in Acts 10, we hear an example of one of the very first Christian proclamations. Luke was not present at the time, so we may assume this sermon is based on the typical thing Peter and the first Apostles did preach in Luke’s hearing. We note that the Christian proclamation contains all the essential ingredients of our faith from the earliest of times. There is no time-lag when there was a version of Christianity that didn’t include the resurrection, or Jesus being the Son of God, or the forgiveness of sins for the whole world through faith in Christ alone.

Peter describes Jesus as healing people, which he interprets as a sign that Jesus was confronting the devil and defeating him and Peter claims that after eating and drinking with Jesus again after the resurrection he was given the commission he now has to proclaim the good news to the world.

It was not the undeniable power and wisdom of Jesus’ teaching that produced such faith, understanding and courage in Peter. Peter had frequently, misunderstood Jesus’s intentions – famously at Caesarea Philippi when Jesus accused him of acting on Satan’s behalf when Peter said he would prevent Jesus from going up to Jerusalem to face death (Matthew 16:22); at other times he meant well, but quickly faltered – such as trying to walk on water (Matthew 14:30-31); on the eve of the crucifixion, Peter denied knowing Jesus at all (Matthew 26:69-75). It was only the resurrection and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that made all the difference to Peter. John sees the two events as one, which they are essentially, even if we favour Luke’s time-table of a delay between the resurrection at Easter and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

Today’s question must be: What difference has knowing Jesus and his resurrection made in your life? No one can know the risen Christ and not be changed by the experience forever. That doesn’t mean all doubt and fear and ignorance will be magically banished from your life through faith in Christ, but it does mean you see the whole universe from a new point of view.

It still took Peter some time to comprehend the full ramifications of what Christ had done on the cross with regard to Gentiles. So Peter took until he had his vision at Joppa of the unclean animals coming down from heaven and being told to eat (Acts 10:9-16) and his subsequent meeting with Cornelius who Peter sees being blessed by the Holy Spirit before Peter fully understands that the gospel of Christ is for all people in the world, without ‘favouritism’ as he puts it in verse 34.

For Peter, this meant looking at the world and particularly the traditional Jewish/Gentile division from a completely new angle. It is this sort of fundamentally life-changing new understanding of the world that Paul is speaking of in such passages as:

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Acquiring an Easter faith will do that to you; it will turn some aspects of your previous understanding of reality upside down, even if at times, it takes a while for the penny to drop. How long did the Church live with slavery?

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Yet how new, exciting and life-changing does Easter faith really seem to you? That is the question.

For those of us who have known the risen Christ for years, even the story of Easter, even John’s dramatic telling of it, can become commonplace and familiar. That is a terrible thing to admit, but I bet you there are many Christians today who have found better things they would rather do with this day than celebrate their Easter faith.

The Church has been blessed with New Life, the first fruits of a new creation – and yet still people can get bored! Fortunately, resurrection isn’t just something that happened two thousand years ago in a Garden in Jerusalem, but ever since that day has continued to be at work in the life of the Church. It is as if the Body of Christ sheds its dying and decaying cells, to be constantly renewed by new, living, growing cells to replenish the Body.

Often these cells of new life start out small and unnoticed, perhaps initially on the fringe of things. But if we know where to look, Christ’s resurrection power is still at work among us.

Let us take a few examples from history.

Let us start with Mary Magdalene at the very heart of the first Easter Day; there she is in a male-dominated society, a woman with either previous mental health issues (demons) or questionable morality (to those who still suspect her of being a prostitute), in the early hours, alone in a cemetery paying homage at the grave of a declared and executed criminal. These were not propitious circumstances for a new faith that would change the world.

Or what about the teenage boy captured by raiders and taken into slavery, who suffered loneliness, hunger and cold in a foreign land, yet in his desperate plight did not abandon his faith, but found his faith in Christ deepened. Who after he escaped from his captors 5 years or so later and had re-joined his family, then voluntarily returned to his captors to preach the gospel in response to a vision in which he heard the plea: ‘Come and walk among us.’ St Patrick spent the last 30 years of his life converting the people of Ireland, his previous captors.

Or what of a disillusioned monk, despairing at the corruption and veniality of the Church and from his private agonising takes to the world stage and launches the Protestant Reformation? When we despair at the state of the Church we are prone to just walk away; thankfully, Martin Luther saw it as a spur to action.

Or the familiar story of a failed evangelist who returns home in humiliation and despondency? What do we think an Oxford academic trying to reach out to common people in the streets can possibly achieve? Yet today, the life of John Wesley continues to touch the lives of millions around the world.

I guess that for new life to come, you have to first despair of the way things are, wrestle with the failures and futilities of present ways before you become open enough to the Spirit to be taught a new way. Perhaps you have to experience the death of your first dreams, before you are ready for the resurrection of new hope and new possibilities.

So if you are struggling at the moment with your faith, if you feel frustrated and disillusioned by the way things are going, perhaps that is the necessary prelude to the new thing that God has in store for you. Do not turn your back and walk away too soon; hang around awhile in the Garden, like Mary – for you never know who you might strike up a conversation with, indeed that conversation may have started already, but you have yet to discern the one with whom you are speaking.

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