

The Great Vigil of Easter and Easter Day
April 23-24, 2011

So, tonight, we and the Eastern Orthodox Church celebrate the same Easter. Sometimes theirs is a week later, but it will never be later than this in our lifetimes. They say that since God played the ultimate joke on the powers of evil by cheating death, they tell jokes on Easter. So, to give pause to our four baptismal candidates, all men as it turns out, I have one for you.

As you know there has been plenty of speculation about the historical Jesus. Who was he, what was he like and so forth. Late one night, the scholars were worn out with it all, so they came up with this:

Clearly, Jesus was Jewish. After all, he went into his father's business. He lived at home until he was 33. He was sure his mother was a virgin and his mother was sure he was God.

But then, Ethiopia is not so far away. Maybe Jesus was black. After all, he called everyone "brother", he liked gospel, and as we all know from this last week, he couldn't get a fair trial.

Well Rome is not so far away either. Maybe Jesus was Italian. He talked with his hands, he had wine with every meal and he used olive oil.

Maybe Jesus was from California. He never seemed to cut his hair, he liked going barefoot and he started a new religion. Or he was Irish. He never married, he was always telling stories and he loved green pastures.

Suddenly, it was very clear. How had they not seen the obvious! Of course! Jesus was a woman! She had to feed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food. She kept trying to get a message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it. And finally, even when she was dead, she had to get up because there was more work for her to do!

It was night when Mary Magdalene went to the tomb—the night of weeping and despair and bitter disappointment, maybe even the night of disbelief: how could this have happened? Do we dare sing "how holy is this night?"

The last thing she expected to find was that this death would somehow be undone, that her dear Jesus would not be missing at all but absolutely and completely alive. It was not that the tomb was robbed, *death* was robbed, robbed of its power, robbed of the last word.

Rene Girard says that culture always develops as a tomb. The tomb is nothing but the first human monument to be raised over the surrogate victim. There is no culture without a tomb and no tomb without a culture. And so the empty tomb means that the disciples of Jesus cannot regenerate conventional culture at the site of this would be shrine. If we live in the light of the resurrection we must live without the tomb at the center of our cultural lives.

Here we are in the deep darkness of wars, natural disasters, economic hardships, health crises, and for some of us, grief and anxiety all too close to home. There is too much reality and not enough seeing.

Yet how holy is this night. Even in *this* night, wickedness is put to flight, innocence is restored to the fallen, joy will come to those who mourn, hatred and pride will give way to peace and concord.

Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him. I am reminded of him saying “I have to go away. It is to your advantage that I go so that the advocate the Holy Spirit will come to you, the spirit which will guide you into all truth.” Until this death what reigned supreme in the cultural perspective was the viewpoint of perpetrators who sanction collective violence. But in the violent death of Jesus, the victim was not able to be silenced. The resurrection permanently establishes the victim’s perspective in this world through the voice of Jesus, and that voice does not speak revenge but forgiveness. This is the Spirit’s wisdom, Sophia, which continues to teach us, breaking the stranglehold that the contagion of violence had on this world which could not recognize the good news of the love of God that is without measure and without cause.

I want to cling to Jesus. I want his resurrection to be true. But truly, when I am lost in the darkness without the eyes to see that it is “this most holy night,” the resurrection of Jesus alone was never enough. The question it seems to me is not *did* this happen, but *does* this happen, now, to us—not after we die, but here in this life, on this earth, *now*.

Pilate says, behold the man! Adam, human beings were created on the 6th day. The next day, Jesus dies. He says, “It is finished!” The work of creation is done. On the 8th day he rises to begin the new creation, the world not governed by the powers of death and violence who justify that violence in the name of God.

Indeed, Jesus waked from the dead to work, and that work is the work of the Holy Spirit in us. Jesus needs us. Jesus calls us. Jesus asks us to make his resurrection real in this world, to bring all the work of love and reconciliation, justice and peace to fullness and completion so that the world’s sorrow will indeed turn to joy.

The truth is that we are already reconciled to God in the life of Christ through whom each of us has come to be. None of us are separated from the love of God or the life of God. We exist even now in the life of Christ, the womb of God. Baptism is a celebration of the truth that we are God’s own children already. The separate self has died and the true life that we live is hidden with Christ in God. Baptism is a symbol of all our dying—disappointment, loss, change, failure, even death itself—and that the Love and Life of God is able to bring life out of *any* death. All our living and dying happens in the very risen life of Christ. So, let us rejoice that we walk in his light and that our own lives tell the story of his risen life so that the whole world may see and know that things which are cast down are being raised up and things which had grown old are being made new. Let them read the word of God in us and say, “Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!

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