

## Reflection: Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

A preaching teacher of mine used to say, "If you're trying to write your sermon and you're not sure how to begin, just start with what you're thinking as you approach the readings for that week." What I was thinking was: "Oh my gosh, it's Easter again!" Easter and Christmas tend to send a surge of panic into the heart of most ministers.

We know they're really big days in the church. We know that Easter is the most important Christian festival of the year. We know there will be people here on Easter Sunday who may not make it to church any other day of the year – except maybe Christmas! - and there's a certain pressure to do or say something really spectacular so you'll come back again next Sunday. We know that the number of adults may multiply, and the numbers of kids may double. It's kind of like having a party and not knowing who's going to be there – only that it's going to be big! No pressure at all, right?

Now I'm a planner. I like to be organized, work ahead, be on top of things. But how on earth do you plan, when you don't know what's going to happen and who's going to be there? No wonder most of us clergy-types collapse in exhaustion at about 1:00 on Easter Sunday afternoon. Expectations are high, and control over what might happen is low. About all that we can guarantee, is the unexpected – which is a little hard to deal with for us people who like to have everything together.

Yet, what is Easter about, if it isn't about the unexpected? Heavens, it didn't matter that Jesus told his disciples over and over and over again that he would die and rise again, they still didn't believe it. If you think scepticism about the resurrection is a recent phenomenon, think again. In fact, one of the reasons I am persuaded that it DID happen is that the early church was so unabashed about the fact that most people DIDN'T believe it. They made no bones about the fact that despite the evidence of an empty tomb staring them in the face, only ONE of the disciples, from Mary Magdalene, to the other Mary, to Peter or John or Andrew or anyone else – saw the tomb and thought, "Praise God– he's risen from the dead, just like he said!" Only one, and that one is recorded in John's gospel alone – and even he didn't say or do anything to indicate to the others he thought something incredible had happened.

No. They thought his body had been stolen, or some mishap had occurred, and whatever it was that had happened, they didn't want much of anything to do with it. Even when those strange guys in white robes told them what had happened, they ran away in fear. In fact, in the earliest gospel, the Gospel according to Mark, that's where the story ends, as you heard today. They run away, and they tell no-one, because they're afraid.

OK then – so what changed some disbelieving, grief-stricken, fearful misfits into a force that changed the world? *Surprise!* God did, in Jesus. Jesus' whole history is one of surprise:

- conceived through the Holy Spirit by an unmarried teenager,
- greeted by a gaggle of shepherds, or a bunch of foreigners (depending on which version of the nativity you read)
- -disobeying his parents and sending them into a total panic at the ripe age of 12 because he wasn't ready to leave the temple in Jerusalem when he was supposed to be on his way back to Nazareth with the rest of the family
- abandoning a respectable profession at around the age of 30 to become an itinerant preacher:

Not exactly the stuff of legendary leaders or spiritual gurus.

He hung around with undesirables: tax collectors, prostitutes, even *non-believers*;  
he condemned the high and mighty and blessed the children and the lowly;  
he chose a rag tag bunch of fisherman, zealots, a businessman, a scholar for his closest  
followers;  
he extended the love of God to anyone who was willing to make a new start and follow him.  
He offered healing to lepers, blind men, and those troubled by demons of mind and spirit.  
He proclaimed that religious law could never trump the needs of the human spirit;  
that giving was more blessed than receiving;  
that to be rich in the spirit is to release our hold on money and possessions, and to be  
generous as God is generous.  
He said he had a special connection to God – a connection that could be shared by anyone  
who chose to receive God’s love and to live it the way he did.  
He said that those who came to him would have their deepest needs met: for he was the  
Bread of Life and the Vine that bears good fruit.  
He said that those who wish to be great must be ready to serve – even to give up their lives for  
others.

Probably the only unsurprising part of his whole story is that he got into trouble. Jesus shone  
light on the darkness in the institutions and the spirit of his day. He showed where power and  
control had trumped compassion, where legalism had over-powered love, where concern for  
the vulnerable had been lost in protecting self-interest.

Shedding light on the darkness sounds like a good thing, doesn’t it? When it happens, some  
will see the light, and be drawn to it. But some will do their best to shut out the light, so that  
the shadows that have crawled across the inner and outer landscape cannot be revealed for  
what they truly are – the reflection of human brokenness and sin. Jesus shone a light; and the  
authorities and the mob did their very best to put it out. But as the Gospel of John begins, “the  
light shone in the darkness, and – surprise! – the darkness could not put it out.”

Surprise again – the first witnesses to his resurrection were the women of his company; and  
surprise again, the first recorded declaration of the Good News of the resurrection came from  
the mouth of a woman who had once been tormented by demons, illness of mind and spirit.

Surprise! God did it again. Jesus lives, and all that light he shone in his short life, all that light  
that spread out into the lives of his followers, and out into the whole world, that light still shines.  
From out of the mouth of a once-shadowed tomb the light is glowing, it’s growing. It filled the  
hearts of those first disciples, and turned them into vocal and fervent witnesses to the new life  
they found in Jesus. Somehow that light overcame their fear. Perhaps in the same way that  
the warmth of a sunny day puts bounce in our footstep and energy into our living, so the  
magnified and holy light of Easter renewed their spirits and gave them the ability, not to just  
soldier on, but to move forward joyfully, with passion and commitment.

What will it take, for that light to be reflected in your life? What will it take for the reality of  
Jesus’ resurrection to really grab hold of you and set your heart on fire? I don’t know what that  
is. What I do know, is that it won’t be because this congregation put on a spectacular Easter  
service, or because I preached a ground-breaking sermon. What I’m almost positive of, is that  
however it is that the Holy Spirit will catch hold of you, it will come as a surprise. All we’re  
doing this Sunday morning is making room for the Spirit, making room for the light, bearing  
witness to the light, and hoping and trusting that Easter will seize your heart, as it has seized  
so many others throughout the centuries. In the meantime, we say with joy: Christ is Risen!  
Hallelujah! One more time! And again! Amen.