

On this Easter Sunday morning we are reminded that we gather for worship on Sunday rather than the traditional Jewish Sabbath because early Christians chose to anchor their faith in the concluding, climactic event of the Jesus story: *Jesus who was crucified, dead, and buried was raised to new life by the power of God.* On Easter morning, the tomb where his dead body was laid was found empty. Early witnesses testified to having experienced the presence of the living Christ, and the church came alive in the power of God that raised Jesus from the dead. The opening blessing in 1 Peter touches the foundation of the Christian message: “he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”

Easter emerges in the life of the church as “a living hope.” According to Jürgen Moltmann, the Marxist atheist Ernst Bloch hits the nail on the head when he writes: “Where there is hope, there is religion.” Moltmann notes that religion is not always hopeful, but living toward the future in a life of hope opens our faith in God as both the source and destiny of life. If we begin with God, we shall surely end with God (*The Experiment Hope*).

Marcus Borg has been controversial in conservative Christian circles for his leadership in the Jesus Seminar and persistent challenge to a reading of the Gospels as pure historical fact, yet he voices the consensus of the New Testament that the Easter event is the foundation of the gospel of Christ. In *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright disagree over the details and sometimes over the meaning of Gospel stories. Most of the time you cannot insert a dime between their difference of understanding. Borg readily acknowledges their common understanding of the place of Easter: “Easter is utterly central to Christianity. ‘God raised Jesus from the dead’ is the foundational affirmation of the New Testament.” Borg goes on to say, “We also agree that the best explanation for the rise of Christianity—indeed, the only explanation—is the resurrection of Jesus” (p. 129). Furthermore, Borg joins with John Dominic Crossan in concluding that without Easter we would know nothing about Jesus. Had the story ended with crucifixion the disciples would have folded in despair and Jesus would have been forgotten (*The Last Week*, p. 190).

Tradition calls for Easter worship to focus on the Easter story, the resurrection of Jesus. It is good to be reminded of why we are here today. Again we gather to affirm that the message of Easter is not just important; it is essential to our faith in spite of differences between the four Gospels.

But after forty-nine years of pastoral ministry, I have come to see something more important than debating the historical facts in the Gospels. The fact that we are here today celebrating Easter speaks volumes about the living Christ in the living church. We can debate but we cannot get to the historical facts in the documents that we have inherited from our Christian forebears. I am convinced that early Christians were much more intent on proclaiming their faith in Christ than in documenting historical facts. The more we try to push our scientific, historical concern for facts into the biblical world, the more we are doomed to be confused.

Beyond historical facts is *the fact* that we are here today. If Easter is central to the Christian message, then it must lie at the center of our faith in this place today. Borg and Crossan are right. If the Jesus story ends in crucifixion of another Jew by Rome, Jesus is no different from the thousands of other Jewish martyrs who disappear from human memory. But the Jesus story goes on. The vital presence of the living Christ continued in his church, the same church that produced our New Testament; and Paul concludes that the church is the body of Christ. The Incarnation of God in Christ continues in his church. Christ is risen. Indeed, Christ lives in his followers. This does not mean that the church as Christ’s body is beyond any need for critical improvement; but just as God was in Christ in the clay vessel of the human body, God in Christ continues in the frail clay vessel of the church, the body of Christ on earth.

So even in the ancient documents of the New Testament Easter is more than a once upon a time kind of event in history proven by documentation. Easter is the watershed moment in human history that divides despair from hope and sets our paths toward fulfillment and meaning.

Today we need to acknowledge that the first Christians had to deal with the same kind of frustrations that torment our minds. While they proclaimed victory over the powers of sin and death

through the resurrection of Jesus, they lived in a world in which sin and death continued to rule the day. The message of Easter plays out in the life of the church as a basis for hope in spite of the continuation of death and in spite of the evil presence of Roman domination. The daily slaughter in Syria, the extended struggle in Egypt, and the uncertain outcome of Lybia are not new stories in world history. The fact that they are primarily Muslim countries makes no difference. The same powers of the death and despair that control their destiny were enthroned in the world that produced our New Testament.

Easter hope emerges in personal and political transformation. Granvil Kyker was one of my heroes. Dr. Kyker was a retired research chemist who had spent his career with Oak Ridge Associated Universities. He had been a pillar of his church and a champion for human liberty. With the encouragement of his pastor Ed Galloway, he stood before the Tennessee Baptist Convention in the 1960's and called for an end to the racial segregation of Baptist schools and hospitals. According to witnesses, he was booed from the platform one year. Granvil and Mary Agnes had a penchant for locating and acting on causes of justice and peace. They started the food and clothing pantry in their church.

The week we moved to Oak Ridge, Granvil and Mary Agnes received the diagnosis of her terminal lung cancer. She lived about a month, and Granvil began the struggle to deal with the most earthshaking revolution that he had ever faced, life without Mary Agnes. He liked to tell about her shocking word to friends and families when they were married. Mary Agnes declared that they were going to get married and love one another for the next fifty years. Then, they might decide to get a divorce and live the rest of their lives together in sin.

They had lived more than fifty years of a marriage that only death could separate. Then, Granvil had to find a new reason to live without the love of his life. We talked a lot. At times Granvil thought he was losing his mind. He saw Mary Agnes in every room of their house. She appeared in his dreams and dominated every stray thought. I tried to assure him that being crazy in times of grief is normal and that experiencing the continued presence after death of someone you love is not unusual. His grief was real and as painful as could be expected from someone whose love was so deep. But Granvil's faith in the eternal, loving God revealed in Jesus Christ was also real.

One day in a grief support group he shared his Easter faith. The scientist in him took precedence over the words of Scripture. He explained his preference for cremation over occupying ground in a cemetery somewhere. Having grown up on a farm in rural east Tennessee, he knew well the biology of life and death and the theology of bodily resurrection that seemed to drive the technology of embalment. He confessed his faith that the God who put life together in the first place knows the location of every molecule in his body; and if life after death means bringing those molecules back together again, God would have no problem. Granvil Kyker had "a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

Thomas Long retells a story from Mary Lou Weisman's book *Intensive Care* about the death of her fifteen-year-old son with muscular dystrophy. In the last minutes of his life, his body was completely paralyzed and his random sounds seemed to indicate a loss of consciousness when suddenly he spoke in a surprisingly clear voice, "Daddy, what does 'impudent' mean?" Struggling to maintain his composure, his father answered, "Son, impudent means bold. It means shamelessly bold." Then the boy paused for a moment and said, "Then put me in an impudent position."

The loving parents folded his arms and legs in an impudent position as his life ended.

Peter's letter was to Christians in dispersion throughout the Roman world. They had suffered for Christ, and more was to come. They knew of the resurrection of Christ, but they had never seen him in the flesh. Sight unseen, they still loved him and committed their hope in Christ. Long notes the impudent position of a living hope in defiance of the powers of domination and death in this word to early Christians. Christ in them was the substance of their hope. They were Easter people, and so are we.