

Weekly Reading – Monday, April 6, 2009

Here it is, Easter Sunday coming up. For many clergy this is a time, not only of lots to do and a procession of services to be planned and led, but of great pressure to "wow" the hoped-for Easter crowds. Adding to the challenge is the popular sense that the matter at hand at Easter is mortality and/ or immortality, that is, life after death. While this is part of what is at stake in Easter preaching, it tends to narrow things too much and to reduce Easter to the question of life after death and personal immortality alone. I found helpful Harvey Cox's book, "When Jesus Came to Harvard," and in particular his section on Easter and how Jesus died. Cox notes that how Jesus died, crucifixion, has to be important. If it had been simply a normal death then the issue or meaning might be mortality/ immortality. But the resurrection of a crucified man, and in particular this crucified man, makes resurrection about more than mortality. It is about justice and it is about moral meaning. In our Easter preaching we need to resist reductionism to a narrow emphasis on "eternal life," and proclaim a more fulsome resurrection with implications not only for life after death but even more for life before death. That said, we turn to the texts for April 12, 2009.

Acts 10: 34 - 43

This speech from Peter takes place on the occasion of his visit to the home of the Gentile Cornelius and God's revelation to Peter that the message of the gospel is not for one ethnic, national or religious group but that it is universal. "You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all." The balance of the text is an evocative, creed-like summary of the Jesus story, including, "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day . . ." This text has frequently been called into service of the cause of inclusivity, drawing particularly on vs. 34 and Peter's words, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality . . ." But that is, at best, half the story. The other half is the assertion of the universality of the gospel. "He is Lord of all." If inclusivity goes down easily in most parts of the mainline church, universality is a more challenging claim and word. I have noted elsewhere Fleming Rutledge's contention that our preaching today is more anthro-po-logical than theo-logical. The option for inclusivity (about us) rather than universality (about God) in interpretation and proclamation of this passage may be a case in point for her contention. While it is certainly true that the gospel shatters the barriers of exclusivity of race or nation, it is also true that God's act and revelation in Christ is of universal implication and meaning (otherwise, why bother?). "He commanded us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead."

I Corinthians 15: 1 - 11

From Peter to Paul. We've had Peter's creed-like summa, now in vs. 3 - 8 we hear Paul's equally creed-like summation of the kerygma, the message he himself received and now hands on. As is true of Paul, the proclamation of the kingdom and Jesus' ministry is muted in favor of sharp focus on crucifixion and resurrection. We hear this through the filters of centuries of "substitutionary atonement" theology. I think there is more Christus Victor theology here than substitutionary atonement, though probably both can be derived from this

passage. Why does that matter? Substitutionary atonement narrows down often to individual meaning and personal immortality only. Christus Victor proclaims God's victory in Christ over the twin powers of Sin and Death which have held us in their grip and bondage. Proclaiming the victory of Christ over these powers and dominions gives the resurrection a much larger scope of meaning with enormous implications for, as noted above, life before death as well as life after death. Such implications become evident when Paul makes it personal in verses 8 - 11. Grace claims one (Saul/ Paul) caught in Sin and Death, a violent persecutor. "By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain." Resurrection means the incursion and victory of God's grace over the powers of Sin and Death and therefore the creation of an utterly new reality at work in the world.

Mark 16: 1 - 8

After the bold proclamations of Peter, in Acts, and Paul, in I Corinthians, the actual gospel account of the resurrection seems oddly muted and shy. Is that refreshing or a let-down? Which ever it is for you, we are reminded that the events of Easter are not simply or immediately "Hallelujah Chorus," lilies, Easter hats and hot-cross buns (though I like all that!) There is mystery. There is wordlessness. There is evocation. There is an empty tomb which may only be empty or which may by its emptiness point to an astonishing and unexpected fullness. At the tomb the woman find their first worry is groundless, the stone has been rolled away. Inside they encounter a messenger with a two-part message. "He has been raised. He is not here." And a charge: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." And then the final verse, not only of the text but of the gospel itself, ". . . terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Period. The end. But it is an ending that leaves you asking, "What happened next?" And that may indeed be the question, and it is a question that is asked, properly, of us, each and all. How will you answer? How will we answer the empty tomb and the cryptic Easter message? In the second and third centuries other writers attached other endings to this first gospel. Somehow that seems wrong, a violation of authorial intent. But maybe it's not wrong? Maybe the point is that each of us is to write a next scene, a new chapter, the rest of the story. Jesus is not back there, behind us, in the past. "He is going ahead of you, to Galilee, there you will see him." Here then is an ending which is a beginning, a new beginning for all humankind.