

“THIS ALTERNATIVE WAY OF UNDERSTANDING EASTER SEES THE EASTER STORIES AS PARABLES ABOUT JESUS. IT UNDERSTANDS THE STORIES METAPHORICALLY. THE STORY OF THE EMPTY TOMB MEANS THAT DEATH COULD NOT HOLD JESUS, COULD NOT STOP WHAT HE HAD BEGUN. THE POWERS KILLED HIM, SEALED HIM IN A TOMB.

BUT THAT WAS NOT THE END. HE CONTINUED TO BE KNOWN, KNOWN AS LORD.”

YOU WILL NOT FIND JESUS AMONG THE DEAD.—MARCUS BORG (loosely quoted)

May I speak only the truth and may only the truth be heard by you, in the name of God, our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sanctifier.

“Listen carefully,” Jesus said, “Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat.

But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over.

In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it destroys that life.

But if you let go, reckless in your love, you’ll have it forever, life that is real, life that is eternal.

Words actually spoken by Jesus of Nazareth?

Maybe.

You won’t find much in all of the Gospel of John that New Testament scholars are willing to confidently attribute to Jesus.

But this saying about letting go and about recklessness in love may be an exception.

For one thing, the structure of this saying is identical to the structure of a similar saying in the much earlier and more historic Gospel of Luke.

“Whoever tries to hang on to life will forfeit it, but whoever forfeits life will preserve it.”

For another thing, there’s nothing particularly “Christian” about the saying.

It’s a universal teaching that could well have been used by the pre-Easter Jesus of Nazareth.

It was written well into the life of the early church, yet it reflects nothing of the early church’s understanding of the post-Easter Jesus.

HOLY WEEK AND EASTER: STARTS TOMORROW

We are fast coming up on Palm Sunday, the beginning of a very busy holy week for Christians.

For me that busyness begins on Tuesday, Holy Tuesday.

On that day I’ll be attending a “Mass of Collegiality” at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

It’s for the 500 or so priests in the Diocese.

Reaffirm our vows and receive fermentum

On that day we will reaffirm our priestly vows.

“Fermentum” will be distributed to each of us.

It’s a custom first practiced among bishops in the early second century, when a particle of Eucharistic bread would be carried from a bishop of one diocese to a bishop of another diocese.

The receiving bishop would consume it at the next celebration of the Eucharist as a sign of communion between the churches.

In a similar way, we clergy on Tuesday will carry fermentum to be used at our altars on Maundy Thursday.

Sacred chrism

Oil of sacred chrism will also be distributed on that day.

Often mixed with fragrant spices, the sacred chrism will be prayed over and “breathed on” by the Bishop before being distributed in small vials.

I want you to know that it’s quite an unusual sight, to see a bishop, or anyone else, I suppose, appear to “dive” head-first into a large silver bowl and seem to disappear there as he prays and expels his breath upon the oil, before coming up for air.

But I digress.

At the conclusion of the mass, a vial of the breathed-on oil will be handed over to me and to others to be used in our churches, primarily at baptisms.

The Mass of Collegiality is a not-to-be-missed event.

Canon Osgood says to clergy, if you’re too busy to attend this mass, you are too busy.

MAUNDY THURSDAY

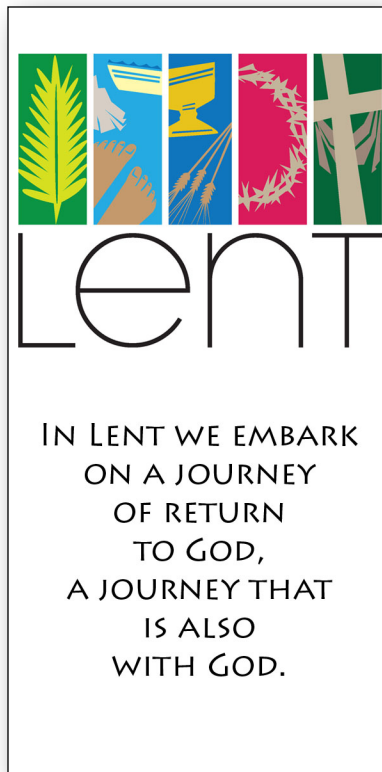
On Holy Thursday we gather here for Maundy Thursday Eucharist, followed by stripping of the altar, and then an Agapé meal.

(During Lent, appropriate foods at such a meal are soup, cheese, olives, dried fruit, bread, and wine.

It’s suitable for the bread and wine to be brought to the altar at the time of the offertory, along with special offerings for the hungry, and then taken to the table where the agapé meal will take place.

GOOD FRIDAY

The following evening, Good Friday, we gather for a liturgy that includes reading of the Passion, we take communion from reserved sacrament, and we leave the church in silence.



EASTER VIGIL

Saturday evening it's the Easter Vigil.

Historically it was the major service of Easter.

It was service at which new members were baptized into the Church.

(Once again this year, I point out, we are advertising "open baptism.")

Anyone who wants to be baptized, anyone who may have slipped through the cracks or missed out on baptism for any reason, anyone may simply show up for the Easter Vigil and be baptized.

No strings attached.

Tell your friends about it.)

Outdoors, in semidarkness that evening, fire will be kindled, the "first fire of Easter," it's called.

The pascal candle will be lit from that fire.

The church will remain in semidarkness until, at the Eucharist, candles at the altar will be lit and the lights come up.

EASTER DAY

Two weeks from today, Easter Sunday.

It's the major celebration of Easter for most Christians.

The pews will be full, the choir will sing, the hymns will be joyous, the reception in the parish hall will be bountiful.

THE MOST IMPORTANT FESTIVAL OF THE CHURCH

Easter is the most important Christian festival, significantly older than Christmas.

Originally, it was not an annual celebration.

In the first century, there's no mention of it.

But although there's no mention of Easter in first-century Christianity, the proclamation "God raised Jesus" was central to Christianity from the beginning.

Many American Christians, maybe most American Christians, understand that what happened at Easter was a "physical" event, an event in which God miraculously transformed the corpse of Jesus so that his tomb would be found empty.

These Americans are Biblical literalists.

If the Bible says the tomb was empty, then the tomb was empty.

Many in nonliteralist churches also see Easter this way, or think they're supposed to.

They haven't yet encountered an alternative understanding of Easter, other than skepticism, and so they think that the literal understanding of Easter is the only option.

Some have misgivings about it and wonder if that's okay.

Can you be Christian without believing that the tomb really was empty?

Short answer: Yes.

You can be Christian without there being an empty tomb.

When we read the biblical post-Easter narratives we find more than a singular, spectacular, factual event in the past.

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg suggests that the resurrection of Jesus is about more than the corpse of Jesus.

The empty tomb is irrelevant.

Rather than focus on "what happened," he focuses on the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus in the New Testament.

What did it mean for his followers to say that God raised Jesus from the dead?

The answer is clear, he suggests.

Throughout the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus has two primary meanings:

"Jesus lives" and "Jesus is Lord."

Jesus was not simply a figure of the past.

Jesus was one who continued to be experienced as an abiding reality in the present.

And he was experienced not simply as a continuing presence, but as a divine reality, as "Lord, one with God.

The lords of the world, including the ruler of the empire that executed him, are not supreme.

THE MEANING OF EASTER

Easter is about much more than whether a spectacular miracle happened on a particular day a long time ago.

It's also about much more than surviving death, for Jesus or for us.

It's about who is Lord.

Is God revealed in Jesus the Lord?

Or is somebody or something else Lord?

This alternative way of understanding Easter sees the Easter stories as parables, parables about Jesus.

It understands the stories metaphorically.

Parable and metaphor are about meaning.

The story of the empty tomb means that death could not hold Jesus, could not stop what Jesus had begun.

The powers killed him, sealed him in a tomb.

But that was not the end.

He continued to be known, known as Lord.

You will not find Jesus among the dead.

IF IT IS BURIED, IT SPROUTS

"Listen carefully," Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a grain of wheat.

But if it is buried, it sprouts and reproduces itself many times over.

In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it destroys that life.

But if you let go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, life that is real and eternal.

PRAYER

Let us pray.

Eternal God, the Great Mystery that is outside everything and yet at the same time inside, keep alive in each one of us the search for a faith that is real, a faith that helps us to live happier lives, a faith that gives us a fuller meaning to life and the events of life.

Bring us to know the goodness that flows from the heart of the universe and may we be expanded in heart and soul by that goodness.

This is our prayer.

Amen.

Jerry Brooks+
Sunday, March 25, 2012