

“Easter as But and Nevertheless”

21 April 2019

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At the entrance to Jerusalem’s Church of All Nations (also known as the Church of the Agony because it sits next to the Garden of Gethsemane) there is a sign warning every visitor and tour guide: NO EXPLANATIONS INSIDE THE CHURCH. Interesting. Perhaps, explanations are best left outside; you know how they can go on and on and can be as annoying as having to listen to someone talk on their cell phone. I’m reminded of the cartoon in which a minister is pictured behind the wheel of a car, and he is driving his son and daughter to church on Christmas Eve. The dialogue balloon reads, “Dad, you’re not going to ruin Christmas again this year by trying to explain it, are you?”

I’m satisfied with simply reading Luke’s version of the story, as we did a moment ago. Not even Luke attempts to explain the resurrection. There is no mention of someone witnessing the first gasp for breath, or the shudder of the limbs, as if the heart started to beat. If Jesus shrugged off the linen cloth, no one saw it glide to the floor. On that morning, everything that was seen yet immediately disbelieved took place in darkness. Luke and the other three Gospels do not explain the resurrection, that is true. But for 2,000 years, now, many still wonder if the resurrection is the best explanation of the Gospel records.

Theodore Wardlaw, Austin Presbyterian Seminary president and professor, noticed a few years back that St. Luke’s account is peppered with the word “but.” Maybe you picked up on Luke’s use of that disruptive, defiant conjunction. In Luke’s account with a mere 12 verses, the word “but” shows up 6 times! *But* is Luke’s attempt to arrest our attention to say – “No matter what you’ve heard, you haven’t heard the whole story yet. Oh, there is a competing story, one of hopeless finality, that is still being peddled, as if the words we speak on any Good Friday are all that remain. Wardlaw writes: “The story that Luke is telling receives and absorbs every ounce of hatred, determinism and self-fascination that the world can dish out. Then it continues on with this announcement: ‘But on the first day of the week, at early dawn.... ‘He is not here, but has risen.’” The gospel, as Swiss theologian Karl Barth once put it, “is not a natural therefore but a miraculous nevertheless.” *Nevertheless*, or in spite of the facts, is as defiant as *but*. And if we dare “speak it,” until it begins to “speak us,” we will find ourselves following the hope-filled steps of the One who is present with us today—in this moment, at this table of thanksgiving, in every room of this building – every day of the week, and in every nook and cranny of this our island home. Tomorrow, people around the globe will gather to say “nevertheless.” From its very beginning in 1970, Earth Day was meant to raise our awareness, here in the United States, “but,” but by 1990, the “nevertheless” had gone global. The alarming facts say “Danger! This is where we are folks,” *but*, “we can act,” *nevertheless*.

Long after all the colored eggs have all been found, after every chocolate bunny has been eaten, the living Christ, God’s mysterious Presence among us, will still spring forth – this is the testimony of those who have and still encounter him. Of course, the post-Easter Jesus remains the star of today’s celebration, no denying that. But if we know anything about Jesus, we have

learned that his stardom was not something he relished; he, in fact, passed on every opportunity to talk about his star quality. This came clearer to me while viewing the recent remake of “A Star is Born,” starring Bradley Cooper and Lady Gaga. I won’t say too much about it, just in case you haven’t seen it. But I want to end by sharing a few lines from one of the concluding scenes. In an unguarded moment, the estranged brother of Jack Maine, an imperfect, alcoholic country-western singer, says to Ally, who is the star being born: “Jack used to say that music is essentially 12 notes between any octave. 12 notes, and the octave repeats. It’s the same story, told over and over. Forever. All that any artist can offer the world is how they see those 12 notes. That’s it.” And then turning his eyes toward Ally, now weeping over the loss of Jack, the brother says, “He loved how you see them. Oh, he kept saying how he loved how you see them.” I know that it may be odd to see an alcoholic country-western star as a Christ figure, but, still, there’s something of an echo here to Jesus’ haunting words, “It is to your advantage that I leave you...for when I go you will do even more than I have done.”

On this Easter Sunday, I’ll confess that I do not know how the Spirit of Christ lives on in us and in all things. But I am convinced that the mystery we call “Christ” is, in fact, alive and well, the One who bids us: “Tell the world how you see your 12 notes.” To the degree that we try to practice resurrection, to the degree that we allow the Spirit to be born anew in us, to the degree that we still visit the tombs of our fears and failures and discover the birth of hope, well, resurrection may help explain why we are here this morning!

The brilliant mystic, Teresa of Avila, born in Spain in 1515, put it this way: “Christ has no body but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes with which he looks with compassion on this world.” In other words, we who are mere flesh and bone, stardust, really, birthed into life by holy Breath, are the feet that walk the earth to do good, the hands that are here to bless. Is this not how we practice resurrection?

Juli and I wish you a happy and blessed Easter. May we, long after the daffodils and tulips are gone, may we practice resurrection every day. Amen.