

5 April 2015

Surprising Life

John 20:1-18

John 20:1-18. *Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' ' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

The human being is a believing creature. Some part of our original programming inclines us to accept the reality of beings, powers, reasons, and truths that we can neither see nor explain, and this tendency seems to affect all humanity.

Oh, I know there are atheists, people who don't believe in anything that cannot be scientifically verified. According to the polls, atheists make up about 7% of Americans. Interesting thing about that, though: in those polls over time, church attendance and religious affiliation numbers go up and down, but the percentage of atheists stays right there, at about 7%. I wonder sometimes if atheism is a naturally occurring genetic variant – like colorblindness or musical genius – something that just happens occasionally.

Whether that's so or not, though, the fact is that the other 93% of us are hard-wired to believe. Something. Even those who reject their childhood faith, by and large, hasten to add that they still believe in God. They are "spiritual" if not religious. Basically, human beings believe stuff. Now the exact content of that stuff varies in different cultures and ages, but there are some common themes. Pretty much everyone believes in a creator, we all basically believe that there are moral imperatives that go beyond mere self-interest (things like care for the weak and sacrificial love), and just about all of us believe that this life is not the end. Some part of who we are will not be extinguished by death.

And so we come to Easter. Today we celebrate the central belief of our faith. On this day, we Christians proclaim our belief that Jesus Christ – who was the Creator, but who lived and died among us as a human – rose from the dead and by doing so made it possible for us to rise as well, granting us also life beyond death. But remember what I just said: we Christians didn't invent belief in life after death. Even in Jesus' time, pretty much everyone believed that death was not the end. They all held to some theory about an existence of sorts beyond the grave. So let me tell you about the three main beliefs of Jesus' time.

First, many believed that after you died, your “shade,” the disembodied ghost of your former self, went to a sort of dark underground holding cell, but with no release date. The Jews called this place Sheol, and the Greeks called it Hades. Either way, it was the realm of ghosts. A second theory, which came to Judea by way of Persian religion, specified two different places that people might go after death. Persian religion saw all life as a struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, and so they thought there were two alternate fates after death. Those who struggled on the side of light and goodness during their life went to a beautiful garden after death – the Persian word for garden is “paradise” – and everyone else went to a place of punishment. This Persian theory had become quite popular in Judea of Jesus’ day. And then there was a third notion, taken largely from the writings of the Greek philosopher Plato. Plato taught that we all have an eternal spark within us, separate from our bodies. This non-physical “soul” was eternal and just took up temporary residence in the body. When the body died, the soul transmigrated up to the realm of souls and then, perhaps after a bit, came back to enter another body. These were the three primary theories in first century Palestine about what happened after death, and each had its adherents. The Sadducees accepted the Sheol theory. Popular thought embraced the Persian notion of Paradise and Hell. And many of the more highly educated went with Plato and that eternal, non-physical spark within.

Before going on, it might be worth pausing to ask if one of these theories is what you believe, because they’re still around. Now, not many go with the grim underground world of ghosts – Sheol – even though it *is* in the Bible. But there are quite a few for whom the focus is on the Persian model of Paradise versus Hell. That one can be found in the Bible, too, in fact. And an awful lot of us today believe in Plato’s idea of an eternal soul that is separate and completely unrelated to our temporary physical forms. I would not be surprised to learn that most people in Christian churches accept this understanding to some degree – even though it is only one of the three that is found nowhere in scripture. So what *do* you think happens after death?

But, there is one more option. Let’s go back to the garden with Mary Magdalene. Given what I’ve just been saying, what did she expect to find there? All of the prevalent theories stress that the body is just a shell, separate from the part of us that survives death, so she would have been looking for an empty body from which her Master’s life had been taken. But the stone that sealed the tomb was gone. She ran and got two of his disciples, Peter and one other, who explored the tomb and found that the body was gone was gone, too – not just the spirit, or the spark of life, but the body. The two disciples went home, but Mary looked back into the tomb, where she saw two angels, who had evidently not been there a minute before. They asked her why she was weeping, and she tried to explain: All that I have left of my Master is his body, and now somebody’s even taken that. She turned around, and there he was, Jesus. Alive. Not a ghost, a physical body. He hadn’t gone to an eternal place of reward. He was still here, or here again, or something. And he wasn’t an eternal spark, a disembodied soul that existed above material existence, but the same person who had loved Mary and the disciples before he died and who still loved them now. He called Mary by name, and he gave her a message of comfort to take to his friends.

In other words, Jesus’ resurrection doesn’t fit anyone’s preconceived notion of what life after death would be like. As we read the other accounts of people’s meetings with the risen Christ, we discover that he *is* physical – he can be touched, likes to eat, walks and talks – and yet is no longer limited by physical things like closed doors. He is different in many ways – like Mary in our story, no one who meets him recognize him by physical appearance – and yet he is essentially the same person: people recognize him when he calls them by name, when he forgives them, and when he breaks bread. He is not really of this world any more, and yet here he is. He isn’t separate either. What characterized Jesus most in his human life was his love for others, and hasn’t changed a bit.

Little though most Christians know it, this is what we teach about eternal life, and it’s different from what anyone else teaches or has ever taught. Jesus’ resurrected life is physical, but it obeys some different laws of physics. It is eternal, but not as an eternal intellectual concept. It is eternal in that it loves eternally with a love that is stronger than death. This is what the risen Jesus is like, and Jesus’ resurrection is just the start. He is the “first fruits from the dead” as Paul puts it. We, too, will live again – in the same way. Death is not when life ends; death is when life is healed and renewed. Resurrection is not when we become something completely different; resurrection is when we finally become ourselves – the real, physical, eternal, loving images of God that we were always meant to be.

This is what Easter means. This is what Christ’s resurrection means.

Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed.