

Easter Day
April 17, 2022

Luke 24.1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Easter Day – one of the central moments and celebrations of our Christian Year. All four Gospel stories – one of which is read today – are, on the surface, pretty simple. Jesus' followers went to the tomb to complete ordinary burial rituals. They discovered what they did not expect. Jesus' body gone, and the revelation that Jesus was somehow alive and present in a new way. But, what did that mean? The story of Easter, by itself, is one that starts as an ordinary day, perhaps a sadder day than usual, and then the world is turned upside-down. None of the Easter narratives draw any conclusions. Every Easter narrative ends with people being both confused, but excited; enlivened but nowhere near enlightened. Jesus alive? What does this mean? The narratives end curiously – the women didn't say anything, or the disciples looked and wondered and just went home. Every Easter narrative ends like the first chapter of a whole new story, with an intriguingly dull cliff-hanger.

The Easter story is inextricably and somehow tied up with our salvation story. Over time, in the decades and centuries that followed Jesus' life, the story and meaning of Easter has been one of the great mysteries of our faith – in some ways simple, in other ways, deep and complex. How DOES Easter connect to our redemption or salvation? What even do we mean by salvation?

Scripture is full of stories of salvation, but those stories describe it in different ways. For Noah and his family, salvation was the opportunity to begin again. For the tribes fleeing Egypt, salvation was the deliverance from being slaves. For the people of Israel exiled in Babylon around 500 BCE, salvation was the return to their homeland, to reclaiming their unique identity. For the Jewish people who worshipped in the temple before its destruction in the year 70, salvation was about making sacred offerings to God as a means of thanksgiving, petition, purification, and reconciliation. Salvation was about restoring relationship through intention and offering.

Throughout the Gospel too, salvation is used in various ways – healing, deliverance from suffering, rescued from affliction. The Greek word simply means "the state of being preserved from harm".

In Christian theology, despite a strong tendency to over-focus on blood and sacrificial language, it is important to remember that salvation is connected to Easter, far more than Good Friday. It is one of the more troubling parts of our inherited liturgical language that sacrifice, penalty and punishment are the dependent metaphors.

On Good Friday, we remember that Jesus was executed. (We sometimes neutralize this by saying ‘when Jesus died on the cross’ but really, we need to name it for what it is and acknowledge that he didn’t just die, he was executed.)

If our salvation was only dependent on Jesus’ execution, and a belief in substitutionary atonement (which is the idea that someone or something has to be killed to pay for the sins of others), then salvation would have been accomplished on Good Friday. If the satisfaction of salvation was an innocent death, then there would be no need of Easter. But, and this is important - we are not saved by an act of violence. That metaphor is pervasive in our culture, and has been for centuries, but it is one of the most damaging myths in Christian theology that we need to address. Perhaps more than we can do in this moment. But, I wonder if the myth of redemptive violence might be a good subject to explore in greater depth, perhaps in an upcoming book study?

Meanwhile, returning to the understanding of salvation in scripture - the common spiritual thread in all of these stories of salvation is *reconnection* – with identity, with home, with community, with wholeness. To reconnect, in humility, with God.

Easter is central to salvation because it tells us that death is not the end. The ultimate harm that we can come to is perhaps our death, but it also might be the countless sufferings, endings, griefs and destruction that our lives can hurl at us. In the moment of dawn, when the darkness still surrounds us, we see that glimmer of light. Easter says ‘take heart, it is not the end, redemption is possible’. Redemption is that moment when the disciples realized that the anguish of Jesus’ death on the cross was not the termination of this vision for what is possible. God reached them beyond their own fear, brokenness and shame. Good Friday was an ending. Easter was and is a beginning.

Salvation comes from God, even as it involves our response.

Theologian Marcus Borg points this out in his book “The Heart of Christianity”.

He says: ‘If the slaves in Egypt had not responded to the message that God was liberating them, their story would have ended there. If the exiles in Babylon had not set foot on their journey of return, they would not have returned to become a nation. If Blind Bartimaeus had not called out “Son of David, have compassion on me”, he would not have been healed. Without our response, little or nothing will change in our lives or in the life of the world. Salvation is the work of God, and yet we must respond.’

You are here, (either listening in church, watching on line or reading this later in the week), not to be passive spectators to a story, but to respond with your heartfelt “yes” to the possibility of redemption in the world, to allow God’s resurrection to bring you back to life. You are here to remember that you are Easter people, who, despite adversity, suffering, brokenness, woundedness, know that redemption is both gift of God, and your sacred purpose.

In a lecture, Archbishop Desmond Tutu illustrated this by quoting St Augustine: “God without us will not, as we without God cannot.” This, Borg says, applies to both our individual lives, and to the wider social dimensions of salvation. Without us, without our response, God will not do it; and we, without God, cannot do it. Without us, without our response, God will not transform us, either as individuals or societies. We without God cannot bring about transformation. But God without our response will not bring about transformation.

I think this is the nature of having faith. It is not about sitting back, and assuming that God will just ‘fix’ the problems, and that salvation will lift us up and away from them. Rather, ‘faith in God’ means reconnecting ourselves and responding. Being Easter People is the way we live, knowing that redemption is already accomplished, even as we live into that reality day by day.

It might seem an ‘idle tale’ as it did to the disciples who didn’t believe what Mary saw and heard. It is in fact the first chapter of a whole new story.

*“...Won't you help to sing
These songs of freedom
Cause all I ever have
(are) Redemption songs.”*

Bob Marley

For further reading from Marcus Borg on ideas introduced in this sermon:

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/10/christianity-divided-by-the-cross/>

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/marcusborg/2013/10/the-real-meanings-of-the-cross/>

Marcus J. Borg was an American New Testament scholar and theologian. He was among the most widely known and influential voices in liberal Christianity. As a fellow of the Jesus Seminar, Borg was a major figure in historical Jesus scholarship.