

“An Early Easter”

Psalm 130, John 11:1-45

April 6, 2014

Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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My friend and colleague, Rabbi Jim Prosnit of Congregation B’nai Israel, says that when Jews speak of the timing of the festival of Passover, they always say it is “late” or “early” but never “on time.” It strikes me that Christians speak of Easter the same way. It is always “late” or “early” but never “on time.”

Easter this year is “late” and, boy, are we glad! The snowfall this past Monday reminded me of my first Easter – April 11, 1982 - as pastor-in-charge in a neighborhood church in Glendale, Queens. Somewhere I have a photograph of the signboard, much like the one here at Mary Taylor Memorial, with the sermon title “In Awe of Easter” posted. And all around it are snowdrifts! The same storm on Monday prompted my younger son Adam to text me *“I think we should not be allowed to use the expression about March going out like a lamb anymore.”*

So today’s title, “An Early Easter,” seems out of place by the calendar. Yet the story of the raising of Lazarus is an early Easter, a promise of what is to come. Despite winter’s relentless grasp on our landscape; despite the hearts of Mary and Martha, frozen with grief; despite the icy shudder that chills our souls when death surrounds us; despite all that, the resurrection promise appears today: *“I am the Resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live; and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”* Rebirth is coming. Hope is coming. Easter is coming.

Yet this is also a story of the struggle to embrace that promise: in the face of death and the loss of hope and future, to know and experience the presence of the Lord.

The grief in the story is palpable: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died*” lament the sisters, Mary and Martha. Curious since two sisters seem so different in Luke 10:38-42. You remember: Mary annoys Martha because Mary studies with Jesus rather than helping Martha: a story for another day.

But in this story the two sisters, seemingly so different, react the same way: “*Lord, if you had been here my brother would not have died.*” In fact, Jesus’ delayed his departure two days after word reaches him about Lazarus’ critical illness; and his theological comment that Lazarus’ illness is “for the glory of God,” appears to give Jesus an “F” in “pastoral care.” Someone who read that line in draft form exclaimed to me “You gave Jesus an ‘F’?” I replied, “Well, I said “appears to give Jesus an ‘F.’” But I can assure you that if any of **you** called **me** and I waited two days to come and I told your friends “*this illness is for the glory of God*”well, you might have some choice words!

With apologies to those who consider this irreverent, I have stood over too many caskets, in too many funeral homes, at too many hospital bedsides to have any dewy-eyed notions about the virtue of suffering. If we take this story as a literal narrative of Jesus’ pastoral response to a grieving family, it leave us confused and angry and him guilty of professional malpractice.

So how are we to understand it? First, the gospel writer has an agenda that he states clearly at the end of his Gospel:

Now Jesus did any other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. (John 20:30-31)

Jesus’ response points John’s readers to belief in Jesus as Messiah. The certainty of Lazarus’ death; Mary and Martha’s grief; the presence of witnesses; the disbelief of some (vs. 37); all set the stage for the miraculous reversal that demonstrates Jesus’ power as messiah by raising Lazarus from the dead.

Second, the story is truly “an early Easter.” It is a preview of what will happen to Jesus. Like his friends in Bethany, Jesus is left on Calvary to suffer, seemingly without hope. Like Lazarus, Jesus is placed in the tomb and remains there. Like Lazarus’ tomb, the stone from Jesus’ tomb is rolled away. Like Lazarus, it is a power beyond the tomb that raises Jesus: the power of God!

That is why this Christ of the resurrection and the life stands in the midst of Mary and Martha’s pain. He stands before the gates of death with tears in his eyes and compassion in his heart. If you have ever had to memorize a Bible verse and been free to choose it, you know the shortest in the Bible: “*Jesus wept.*” (John 11:35) We might want to recall this easy answer when the answers aren’t easy. Jesus weeps with those who grieve and yet proclaims that death is not the final victor! Even when it seems that death has won and it is too late for anything to be done, Jesus stands among the stench and declares “*I am the Resurrection and the life:*” not wishful thinking, but an early Easter and the power of God!

Finally, this is a story about us—you and me—and our ability to connect John’s agenda with the person of Jesus. I wish I could say all will be well, that we will never suffer, that we will never die. But conscience forbids that I be a party to a lie of such monstrous proportions. A lay leader in a former church said it succinctly: “None of us gets out alive.”

Which reminds me of the pastor who stopped in at the travel office. The agent at the desk was flying about. Finally settled, she said, “*Sorry to make you wait, Reverend. Everyone knows they’re going on a trip but they all wait ‘til the last minute to make travel plans.*” “*Yes,*” sighed the pastor, “*it’s the same in my business.*”

So then, do we believe in him who promises victory over death? Can we, with Martha, respond “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.” Believing does not mean we will not grieve, only that neither grief nor death has the last word.

For us on this side of Easter, we know how the story ends.
But it's not just that. We see resurrection breaking into the world:

When nations choose peace over war,
There is the resurrection and the life.

When we respond to natural disasters through
the United Methodist Committee on Relief,
there is the resurrection and the life.

When people offer help without expecting anything in return
there is the resurrection and the life.

When youth become leaders and build trust instead of fear,
there is the resurrection and the life.

When churches find renewed vision and renewed life in
worship and service, moving from maintenance to mission,
there is the resurrection and the life.

When we believe, we have life in Christ's name, and live the
early Easter because Christ stands among us with the promise of
victory. Thanks be to God!