

The Park Church
Adult Study Group
“Understanding Holy Week”
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March 1 – April 5, 2009

Easter Sunday

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Foundational Questions About Easter

1. What kind of stories are the Easter stories?
2. What kind of language are they told in, and how is that language being used?
3. Are they intended as historical reports and thus to be understood as history remembered (whether correctly or incorrectly)?
4. Or do they use the language of parable and metaphor to express truths that are much more than factual?

Our “pre-understanding” of Easter emphasizes the historical factuality, and for many this is the main foundation for Christianity.

Apart from the question of historical factuality, what does Easter mean?

Remember, parables can be even more “true” than history.

And remember that it has been just since the Enlightenment that people have been identifying truth with “factuality.”

The Essential meaning according to Mark

1. The tomb couldn’t hold Jesus.
2. He’s to be found in the land of the living – not the dead.
3. Jesus is raised – that is to say “vindicated.”
4. You will see him (in the “kingdom” or on “the way.”)

When we put all the gospel accounts together, we get these meanings:

1. Jesus lives – you will see him.
2. God has vindicated Jesus
 - a. God’s “yes” to Jesus against the empire and its collaborators

3. Jesus is Lord
 - a. – not the Emperor (Caesar Augustus called himself Lord of All)
 - b. And not the domination systems

Without Easter as God's decisive reversal of the authorities' verdict on Jesus – the cross is simply pain, agony, and horror leading to a horrific substitutionary atonement theology
This leads to cynical politics (all focus is on the next world – not on justice in this one).
It risks sentimentality and vacuity
Easter is not about the return of Spring!
The Realm of God is political and real!

The problems that we and the world share are Egoism and Injustice.
Lent/Easter is the process of transformation and rebirth from these “ailments.”

We cannot understand Easter's meaning apart from the context of confrontation with the authorities and the injustices they perpetrate.

Easter is about anti-imperial theology
Empire is about the use of military and economic power to shape the world in one's own perceived interest.

Compassion and love are utterly central to the message and life of Jesus, and furthermore, justice is the social form of compassion.

So – there are two questions that face each of us at Easter:

1. Do you accept Jesus as your Personal Lord and Savior (as opposed to “Caesar“)?
2. and Do you accept Jesus as your Political Lord and Savior?

Looking back at the two processions from Palm Sunday –
Which journey are we on?
And which procession are we in?

Addendum – Endings to the Story in Mark

The most ancient manuscripts end Mark's Gospel abruptly when the women flee from the tomb in fear and amazement. One ancient manuscript includes this short ending:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Sometime in the second century this longer ending was added:

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while

they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.'

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

The material for this class comes from:

Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Final Days in Jerusalem. HarperOne. ISBN978-0-06-087260-1