

Deborah Sokolove: Christ is Risen: Now What, Indeed?

A Sermon for Seekers Church

25 April, 1999: Easter 4, Year A

by Deborah Sokolove

Christ is Risen: Now What, Indeed?

It's the fourth Sunday of Easter, the season in which we celebrate the familiar astonishment that death doesn't have the last word. The [liturgy](#) greets us with the shout "Christ is risen!" and invites us to answer, "He is risen, indeed!" But you may have noticed that the liturgy this season is somewhat ambivalent, a little restrained, not exactly ringing with Alleluias. Instead, it insists on reminding us that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is not for our individual salvation, not what some folks in liturgical renewal circles refer to as "me and my Jesus theology," but for the healing of the entire, broken, hurt-filled world.

Now, "salvation" is one of those words that, like "evangelism", makes a lot of us here at Seekers a little uncomfortable. For some, it is a reminder of the more rigid, fundamentalist churches of their childhoods, where they heard too many exhortations to "get out there and save souls"; for others, such words evoke memories of being handed tacky leaflets on street corners or conversations with friends or even strangers bent on "witnessing" to us whether we were interested or not. Just that sort of witnessing happened recently, when Glen and I went to a craft fair and stopped at the booth of a charming fellow who makes bamboo saxophones, flutes and penny whistles. We listened to his carnival barker

patter and his musical demonstrations, and Glen asked him a few questions. Glen finally said that he already had too many instruments and so couldn't buy a new one that day. But we picked up some brochures, thinking they would contain the usual run of price lists and ordering information. In general, that was true, but one of the handouts turned out to be, more or less, the story of the music maker's life. It was a compelling tale of childhood abandonment followed by youthful adventures with drugged-out friends, enigmatic gurus, and South American jungles, written with wry humor and clever, hand-drawn illustrations. But, alas, the story stopped before the writing was over – the narrator had accepted Jesus as his personal savior, and, evidently, nothing interesting had happened in the following 22 years. What had started as a piece of pretty good writing had devolved into a tract filled with stock phrases. If that's what happens to those who are saved, it doesn't sound very inviting to me. Good thing I'm already baptized!

But the word "salvation" comes from the same Latin root that also gave us the word "salve", meaning a healing ointment, and "saluta", which the dictionary defines as "promoting health, or curative." Salvation in the Bible is not about pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die, but about health, about healing, about wholeness in relationships as well as in the physical body. The scriptures tell us that Jesus healed many people during his short ministry as a physical, human being. It is true, of course, that those whom Jesus healed were individuals, not just some faceless members of a group. It is as individuals, also, that the disciples were invited by name to come, to follow Jesus. And it is true that each one of us here today had to make a personal decision to get up on Sunday morning and gather at 9:30 instead of staying in bed until noon. So what is this business about the healing of the world?

In the Jewish mystical tradition, there is a notion that in the beginning, God created special vessels into which to pour

the Shekinah, the Spirit of God. But the vessels were too weak to contain the enormous force and vitality of that Spirit, and they shattered into a countless number of radiant shards. It is these broken pieces, each somehow irradiated with the Holy Spirit, that we experience as the created universe and all that is in it. It is the task of God's people, both individually and in common, to gather up as many of those shards as possible and with them to try to repair those broken vessels. Jewish people call this work "tikkun olam." This is the true work of saving souls to which we all are called.

Last week, Dan Phillips talked about being still in the belly of the paradox of his own life, and his realization of how hard it is to change one's habits. I'm right there with him, wondering how I dare to preach the need to participate in God's healing of this broken world when I am all too aware of how much I contribute to its brokenness in my everyday life of driving too many miles in too big a car, of relying too much on electronic devices instead of face-to-face contact, of living the same kind of relatively protected life that [David Lloyd talked about](#) on Passion Sunday. I am so wrapped up in my own redemption from a life of poverty and pain that I don't do much to help anyone else out of theirs.

For the last year or so, I've been saying rather smugly that I no longer read the newspaper over my morning coffee, and find myself in a much better mood most of the time. Not that I'm totally insulated from the news – I listen to Morning Edition or All Things Considered most days, after all, and watch enough TV to get the general gist of things. But without my daily dose of local news filled with killings, rapes, and burglaries, it's been easy to lose sight of just how broken our world is. Even the awful news from Kosovo gets shoved to the back of my consciousness as I struggle to parse German theological texts or write about the aesthetics of worship spaces. This week, like other Americans, I was violently reminded of the world's need for salvation. On Tuesday, on my

way to meet with Celebration Circle, I wrote

*How shall I live my life
when children are being killed
in Kosovo and Colorado?*

*I eat my bowl of soup
while a weeping girl
tells the camera
and the world
and me*

*Of a gun barrel in her face
the blood of friends
flowing around her.*

Christ is risen!

Now what, indeed?

Yes. Now what, indeed? This week's lectionary readings don't give me a lot of help here. Rather, it seems, just the opposite. The 23rd Psalm, which is probably the best known of all the psalms, is written the first person singular. It speaks of a personal relationship between the "I" of the poem and God. "I will dwell in the House of the Lord forever," the psalmist says. But all this week, I've been saying, yes, but what about those children? How can I preach the joy of resurrection in the midst of all this death?

It helps me to know that I am not alone in this quandary. As a way of keeping myself aware of what other Christian churches are doing, I subscribe to an email discussion group focused on liturgy. There, as everywhere else when there is something beyond the ordinary murder and mayhem, the comments have turned to current events. As some of the posts got political, one poster objected that they were "off topic." Last night, Frank Senn, a Lutheran who has been an important contributor

not just to the list but to liturgical scholarship, replied in part:

If it were possible to deal with the tragedy in Littleton, the disaster in and around Kosovo, and the reality of the U.S. and the U.K. adopting the behavior of rogue nations in order to deal with perceived evil in another nation without making this list a discussion of social psychology or foreign policy or a referendum on the 1992 presidential election, there would be some very serious issues for this list to discuss that have to do precisely with our "important work" – liturgy, the work of the people of God.

People have a need to respond in some way to the traumas affecting our society and our world. They even turn to religion. What could we do to meet these needs that provides something better than flashing our headlights? [One suggestion that had come up on the Internet] Some of us engage in the practice of preparing intercessions for Sunday liturgies. How do we phrase our petitions? It is precisely our liturgical task as the priestly community to pray for the world. What do we ask of God in these circumstances?

I'm sorry, but these are existential liturgical questions for me (and I presume for many others as well). They're just as much crucial liturgical decisions to be made as, e.g., what to do with the new fire if its raining when the Easter Vigil starts. I've got to search myself and the liturgical tradition in order to discover what I will be doing in an actual liturgy with actual words by tomorrow morning. They cannot be just any words, because if they are truly liturgical words the priestly people must be able to own them by responding "hear our prayer" or "Lord, have mercy" or "Amen."

And Bishop Donald Perschall, Presiding Bishop of the American Anglican Church in St. Louis, MO replied:

I, like Frank, am sitting in my office this morning doing exactly the same thing – writing material for use in our churches for tomorrow. While I will not get into the fray over the issues, I will offer this much – when the political leaders of our nation state that “the preoccupation with violence is the cause of the tragedies that are occurring in our schools” and in almost the next breath they are justifying OUR latest use of violence upon the innocent – the Church had better have something relevant to say to those who come to it for answers.

I would be so bold as to offer that what we say in these moments is far more important than any mechanics of our rituals. And if this is List is not the right place to deal with this topic, then I am in the wrong place

Like these two gentlemen, each writing out of his own struggle and his own ultimate faith in God’s steadfast loving-kindness, to find the right words for this Sunday morning, I am not willing to get into an argument about foreign policy. I quote them only to remind us that we, here at Seekers, are not alone in our helpless grief and rage at all the bloodshed in so many parts of the world. With the Lutherans, the Anglicans, the Methodists, the Baptists, and all others who are called by Christ’s name, we are part of the Church Universal, the living Body of Christ, who is continually being crucified whenever innocent people suffer.

I am helped in my helplessness, also, by knowing that even Jesus cried, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as he died upon the cross. And these words are more ancient still. They are the from Psalm 22, which begins:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?

*O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.*

...

*I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;*

*My heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;*

*my mouth is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;*

you lay me in the dust of death. ...

But even in the midst of suffering, the psalmist remembers – and we are reminded – that God stands with those who mourn and, mercifully, comforts them.

There are many other places of pain, of grief, of untimely death, of torture, of starvation, of war. Today our eyes are focused on Kosovo and Colorado; yesterday it was somewhere else, and tomorrow, another tragic situation waits. Like the poor, as Jesus admonished us, who will always be with us, so, too, are all kinds of senseless killing always around us. It is because life is hard, because there is so much sorrow, that traditional liturgies have often included the prayer known as *Kyrie Elieson*, which means “Lord, have mercy.” The Reformed churches in The Netherlands introduce the *Kyrie* with: “Let us call on the Lord for mercy, mindful of a world in need, and let us praise the Holy Name, for God’s mercy is without end.” This morning nothing that I can say can add anything to this ancient prayer for our salvation and the salvation of the world:

Kyrie Elieson. Lord, have mercy.

Christe Elieson. Christ, have mercy.

Kyrie Elieson. Lord, have mercy.

Amen.