

Deborah Sokolove: Threatened with Resurrection

A Sermon for the First Sunday of Easter

April 20, 2003

by Deborah Sokolove

Threatened with Resurrection

Today we shout, "Christ is risen!" In fact, for the next seven weeks, we, along with most Protestant and Roman Catholic Christians, will begin each Sunday service with the same cry, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!" Orthodox Christians, following a different church calendar, will wait a little longer, but soon they, too, will be joining the joyous refrain: Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed!

Last Sunday, we cried [Hosannah](#) at the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, as Dan so wonderfully evoked Jesus' own mixed feelings and our own, already knowing the hard parts of the story that come next. On Thursday evening, many of us washed one another's feet, as Jesus washed those of his disciples, at their last meal together before the crucifixion. Moreover, on Friday, some of us joined with other Christians at various events commemorating the Passion of Jesus, following the Stations of the Cross. This pilgrimage tradition, begun some time in the 12th century, includes meditations on fourteen "moments" of Jesus' journey on the last day of his life. The first is "Jesus is condemned." Then, in successive stations, Jesus carries his cross; after falling, he meets his mother, Mary, Simon is conscripted to help him, and Veronica wipes his face with her veil; falling again, he meets the other women of Jerusalem, who weep for him; after falling a third time, he is stripped of his garments and nailed to the cross. At the final

station, Jesus dies, the heavens grow dark and the veil in the Temple is ripped in two.

This traditional meditation on the Passion of Jesus has been adapted, in recent years, by some communities of faith who see that Jesus is always being crucified, wherever there is violence, oppression and injustice. Taking their processions out of the church building and into the streets, they carry a large, wooden cross and stop to pray at a park that is used as an open-air drug market; a burned-out building; the site of a drive-by shooting. They stop, also, at homeless shelters, at food pantries and at other places where poor people gather. At each station, they make explicit the connection between the Biblical story and the ongoing connections between the abuse of power and poverty, hopelessness, and fear.

Why am I telling you these sad stories, when today we are supposed to be celebrating? Why does the reflection in your bulletins suggest that resurrection might be a threatening idea? Aren't we supposed to be comforted by knowing that in Christ, we have eternal life?

Well, yes. Except that, sometimes, eternal life does not sound very comforting. There have been times in my life when I was in so much emotional pain that to go on living felt like a threat. I would have welcomed death as a blessed release. I think of my mother, many years ago, as she sought relief from the ever-increasing pain of cancer. Her death was, I believe, a release from a life that had become defined and circumscribed by physical suffering. Moreover, I think of all the people throughout the centuries who have been held captive and tortured by unjust governments. Surely, many of them, even those without faith in an afterlife, longed for a swift and merciful death. It is not, ever, death that I fear, but protracted illness and pain. If I were told I would have to live forever in this body, which I am coming to recognize may never again be free from what doctors like to call "discomfort," I would surely view it as a threat.

These last many months, as the drumbeats of war grew ever louder, I have thought a lot about pain and suffering, about life and death and resurrection. Now, just this week, we are told that the war in Iraq is pretty much over, that the “coalition of the willing” has won. We have seen statues of Saddam Hussein toppled, crowds of Iraqi citizens dancing in the street, American POWs released from captivity. Is it only a coincidence that war and winter dragged on all through Lent and that now we can celebrate the coming of spring, the ending of war and Christ’s resurrection all at once?

I do not know the answer to that, but I am having trouble celebrating. It is, of course, no coincidence that our observance of Easter falls at about the same time as the Jewish Passover, which is a feast of liberation. Although scholars quibble about the exact timeline, the scriptures are clear that the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus was right around the time of Passover. Like Easter, Passover is a moveable feast, the exact date determined by the first full moon of spring. Moreover, like Easter – which always reminds us that the body of the risen Christ is not perfect, but always bears scars – Passover is a qualified celebration.

As many of you know, the Passover Seder, somewhat like Eucharist, is a meal in the midst of a religious ceremony. Unlike Eucharist, which usually is just a taste and a sip, however, the Seder is an elaborate, multi-course dinner. As a child, I often found the prayers and stories, repeated exactly the same way, year after year, excruciatingly boring. Aside from the fact that I was not particularly interested in rabbinic discussions about exactly what was meant by the phrase, “all the days of your life,” from the perspective of a kid, at least, it took a very long time to get to that meal. One part I liked, however, was the recitation of the plagues. Alternatively, I should say, recitations, as there were several, one right after the other. And each time the list of plagues was recited-whether it was the short version: Blood,

Fire, and Pillars of Smoke; or the long version: Blood, Frogs, Vermin, Wild Beasts, Pestilence; Boils; Hail; Locusts; Darkness; Slaying of the First-Born; or the incomprehensible Hebrew acronym, D'tzakh, Adash, B'ahav-we would spill a drop of wine from our cups at every word. My father's older sister, who often joined our festive table, taught me to avoid spilling too much by dipping my little finger into the cup, shaking the drop off onto my plate.

Somehow, I could not find it in any book I currently own, but I remember that, every time we did this, some grownup would explain that we spilled out some of the wine from each of our cups to show that our cup of gladness should not be too full. There is a story, a Midrash, which dates back at least to the 6th century. It relates to the drowning of the Egyptians after the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea. It seems that while Miriam and the other Israelite women were dancing and playing the tambourine and singing, "Sing to our God who has triumphed gloriously, who has flung horse and rider into the sea!" the angels were celebrating with them. However, the Holy One was displeased with the angels. The Israelites, after all, had just escaped from four hundred years of oppression, so they had reason to celebrate. The angels, however, had no such excuse. "How," the Holy One thundered, "can you sing and dance before me, while the Egyptians, who are also my children, are drowning?"

This morning, remembering that story, and the partially-emptied cup of gladness, I find myself asking, How can I celebrate before the Holy One, while all over the world, including right here, outside our door, the children of the Most High continue to die of preventable diseases, of untreated injuries, of gunshot wounds, of all manner of injustice and oppression? How can we celebrate the Risen Christ, when so much of the world is still lost and broken? How can we celebrate Easter in what are, for so many, still very dark days?

As I ask this question, I find it strangely comforting that the alternate Gospel reading for today, from Mark, ends so ambiguously. As in the John passage we just heard, some of the women go to the place where Jesus' body had been placed, to anoint it for proper burial. In this version of the story, they find the tomb open and empty. Inside, they see a mysterious figure, who tells them not to be afraid-that the One who has been crucified has risen, and will meet them and the other disciples in Galilee. The women, however, are not ready to celebrate. The passage ends, "They made their way out and fled from the tomb bewildered and trembling; but they said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid."

"They said nothing to anyone, because they were so afraid." Well, yes, I think I would be afraid, too. A man they had loved as teacher and as friend had just been killed by the authorities, before their very eyes. In the small hours of the morning, at the first possible opportunity, they have come to care for the body. Now the body is gone, and some unknown person tells them that he has "risen."

At that moment, the women and men who had followed Jesus had no idea what that might mean. As we will read in the lectionary in the coming weeks, at first the disciples are paralyzed by fear and grief. Some of them lock themselves in an upstairs room. Others leave town. It is only after some time, as, little by little, they recognize the presence of Jesus somehow still among them, that they come to understand that something wonderful and unexplainable has happened. It is only seven weeks later, at Pentecost, when they, themselves, are transformed, that they start to understand the reality of Christ's resurrection. Even then, they have not forgotten the pain they felt when their beloved leader died, but they finally begin to recognize that Christ still lives in them and among them. Still bearing the scars of their grief and fear, they learn to love and heal one another, and go out to spread the good news of God's healing grace throughout the world.

A few weeks ago, I was in Nashville, doing some research for my dissertation – no, I have not finished writing it, but it is well on the way. As often happens when one is following call, unexpected doors began to open. You might or might not remember that my dissertation is about other congregations that do something more-or-less similar to what we do here-mark the seasons of the church year visually by putting tokens of the life of the individual, local congregation on the altar-table. Therefore, I have been interviewing a number of people about their ideas and understandings of what this way of using the altar-table means to them.

One of the doors that opened was an unscheduled meeting on my last morning in Nashville. On the suggestion of one of the people I had planned to see, I knocked on the door of a woman considered an expert in liturgical design. Although she did not really know who I was, she greeted me warmly, saying that she only had ten minutes before her next appointment, but we could talk until that person showed up. However, fresh snow on the ground kept her expected visitor away, and somehow the conversation stretched into nearly two hours, two hours filled with grace.

We talked about many things, but what sticks with me most is a story that she told me about a friend who wanted to honor the anniversary of a personal tragedy by having a picnic in a local cemetery. Our entire life as Christians, this woman said, is a picnic in a cemetery, a celebration in the presence and awareness of death. Communion, she reminded me, was often celebrated by the early church in graveyards and burial places. Talking about the early church worshipping in the Roman catacombs, she said,

. . . [it] was not just a hideout – I mean, that was what I was taught when I was growing up, because then we would have had to ask the question, “what were they doing down there?” What they were doing down there was about life and death and resurrection. And then they built their churches over the top

of it. We've lost our feeling for the bones and for life and death and resurrection.

It is this disconnection from the bones, from the reality of life, death and resurrection, that keeps us from the real power of the Good News. For over a thousand years, Christians built their altars over the bodies of saints and martyrs, the bones and teeth and bits of cloth that helped people feel that they were close to those who now lived in the presence of God. For them, the bread and wine of Eucharist really were the Body and Blood of Christ, made present in the presence of the gathered assembly. That assembly included those members of the Communion of Saints who were now buried in the graveyard just outside the door; in elaborately carved tombs in the undercroft of the church; and, as relics, in the very altar on which the elements rested.

As post-Enlightenment, educated children of the Reformation, we tend to feel a little spooked by that sort of thing, calling it superstitious, irrational, evidence of a discredited kind of magical thinking. We live in a culture obsessed with the belief that if we exercise daily, eat our vegetables and get our regular checkups at the dentist, doctor and ophthalmologist, we will be able to maintain perfect health and fitness forever. We do not want to be reminded that disability, illness and death are an inescapable part of the human condition. We do not want to remember that the hands, feet and side of the Risen Christ always ache from the wounds of crucifixion. We don't want to remember that the real, living, resurrected Body of Christ-the Word of God made flesh-is made up of fragile, earthly, skin and blood and sinews and bones.

Yet, by the grace of God, we do remember, and we celebrate, even in the presence, awareness and sadness of death. We bring our picnic to the cemetery, which is the entire broken, hurting world. Together, we break bread, and say that it is

the Body of Christ, broken for us and for all who want to do God's will. We drink, and say, "This is the cup of the New Covenant, poured out for the healing of the world." We proclaim the heavenly banquet, an endless feast from which no one who wants to eat is turned away. In our celebration, in our eating and drinking, we receive what we already are and become what we eat-the body and blood of Christ. In our celebration, we rejoice in the love of the One who creates and sustains us; who breathes in, through and around us; and who gives us strength, comfort, rest and the peace that passes all understanding. In our celebration, we receive the astonishing, no-strings-attached gift of eternal life.

The promise of eternal life is not that our bodies will never sicken and die; not that we will never feel physical or emotional pain; not even that the world will be free of war, poverty, oppression and injustice. The promise of eternal life is that, even in the midst of death, we live in Christ, and Christ lives in us. When we have the eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to feel it, we are integrally connected with one another, part of the resurrected, eternally living, Body of Christ. Through the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we can feed the world with our substance, heal the world with our energy and share the Good News that we have found with all who want it. Yes, we do live threatened, but we also live with resurrection.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen, indeed! Alleluia!