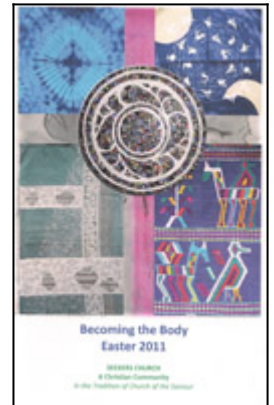


“Jesus of Galilee is Good Enough for Me” by Pat Conover

1 May 2011



The Second Sunday of Easter

I've got a love/hate relationship with the Easter story and it is easier for me to get to the hate part than the love part. Marjory's sermon last week helped. Celebration Circle's liturgy for Easter helped. But I've got three problems with the Easter story. This Easter we got the story from John, as Marjory noted, a constructed story to make a point.

We also get Easter stories in Matthew and Luke, each constructed with their points of view, both added on to the core narrative of the life of Jesus presented in Mark. I like the Luke story best because it is not presented as the climax of the Christian story. Resurrection is a landmark on the way to Pentecost. Looking back from a hundred generations in their future, we can look at the resurrection story as salvation for individuals and Pentecost as salvation for communities. I want to note that Pentecost is Luke's story about the gathering of

the church around Peter, not the later gathering of the Gentile churches around Paul and other apostles.

My three troubles with Easter apply to Matthew, Luke, and John. They are problems magnified by Paul and crystallized in later New Testament letters such as the lectionary reading from First Peter. In First Peter, the name given to Jesus is Jesus Christ, and it is hard to hear the name Jesus Christ without somehow thinking that was the first and last name of Jesus like my name is Pat Conover.

So here are my three problems. Maybe some of them are problems for some of you. Maybe not. Anyhow, your listening might just help me get over my problems. If you don't like what I say you can think of it as group therapy for me.

My first problem is the magical framing of the stories. I can get past the magic of dying but not really dying as just the way the writers talked about their experience of Jesus using the concepts they had available. My first problem is that I don't like what the magic was pointing at. I don't like the lines of thinking that Jesus was some kind of special person, or maybe a unique God-and-person at the same time, or just God visiting Earth and pretending to be a person.

Jesus is my Savior because he was a human being like you and me. This is Jesus of Nazareth as the primary name found in the gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke/Acts. If you want a last name for Jesus I suggest Josephson. My point is that whatever seemed special about Jesus to his followers and disciples was something they could become and be.

My second problem with the Easter stories is that they are the center piece references for the theology of atonement, the theology of Jesus dying for our sins, the original framing of orthodoxy as found for example in the Apostle's Creed.

Here is how I memorized it as a Presbyterian teenager.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and Earth, and In Jesus Christ his only son, our Lord:

Who was born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified dead and buried. He rose again from the dead, ascended into Heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty from whence he will come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Amen.

Jesus is my Savior and to work that out for myself I had to get over the Apostle's Creed. I had to get over a focus on going to heaven. I had to get over a chronological understanding of a future day of judgment with Jesus cast as Judge.

Atonement is about Jesus cast in a heavenly drama as the Lamb of God who was God sacrificing himself so that we could be forgiven. The story of God committing suicide, but not quite, is the sort of speculation I can get along without. We don't

need Jesus as a magical sacrifice to believe that God forgives sins, to take the guidance that we should seek forgiveness and offer forgiveness. That is the message of the sacrament of Baptism in the tradition of John the Baptist. John presented that radical message before Jesus was dead. Jesus was baptized and forgiven before he died.

I've gotten over atonement theology, gotten over a focus on going to heaven, gotten over Greek dualism that separates body and spirit. That wasn't easy and I am unhappy that a lot of Christians are still confused by magical thinking and atonement theology. It helps that we are doing pretty well with this maturing of Christian thinking in Seekers.

Another way of talking about my first two problems with the Easter stories, and, in a different way the Christmas stories, is that they draw attention away from Jesus as a fully functioning adult who said what he said and did what he did. That's not sweet Jesus as an innocent baby. That's not dead Jesus who is somehow magically alive. My attention is focused on Jesus who has shown me and taught me the way to salvation, here and now salvation, salvation in the midst of impurity, oppression, depression, compromises, confusion, and hope.

I have a third problem with Easter and it is the trickiest.

It took me quite awhile to get clear about the distinction between the concepts of the Risen Christ and the Holy Spirit. I didn't even notice that I was confused on this point for a long time. This matters a lot to me, matters a lot for the epistemology I am writing as part of my manuscript on

Progressive Christian Theology, because it confuses the three ways of knowing God. Jesus is my Savior, Jesus makes God clear to me, because he guides me to understand and appreciate God as Creator and God as Holy Spirit. When I talk about the Holy Spirit I'm talking knowing God as the immediate experience of God. I'm talking about understanding and appreciating the lures of God that are always available and I'm talking about knowing God in moments of ecstasy.

Paul's direct experience of God on the Damascus Road is named as an experience of the Risen Christ. Paul should have understood and named his experience as an experience of the Holy Spirit, and appreciated Jesus as guiding him to that experience. I'm sticking with Peter at Pentecost who revered Jesus and understood the ecstatic experience of Pentecost as a response to the Holy Spirit, imaged in Acts as little flames of fire, an image, by the way, that was central to Gnostic Christianity.

Paul wasn't much interested in Jesus of Nazareth, had never met the man. He had a career of oppressing the followers who had known Jesus directly. He wrote little or nothing about Jesus of Nazareth. He never made peace with the original disciples after he became an apostle of the Risen Christ.

I have some appreciation of the religion of Paul, but I strongly prefer the religion of Jesus. I strongly prefer the guidance of Jesus for experiencing the Holy Spirit. I like grown up, fully-functioning, Jesus. I like Jesus contending with the opportunities and limits of his life and world, the resources and contingencies of his life and world. I like the courage and humility of Jesus in very difficult circumstances. I like the relationship between Jesus and God and the faith of

Jesus to follow his calling to the end, even when he was not fully understood, even when he chose a path that led to a death of pain and public humiliation. I like Jesus who was not intimidated by the Jewish or Roman authorities. I like Jesus who was able to point to here and now salvation in the midst of terrible circumstances with no need no need to wait for any revolutionary changes. Salvation is about life before death, before any apocalypse or new creative act of God, before any military or political revolution, before relief from economic oppression, about salvation before we really understand salvation, because, in part, we have to experience it to fully know it.

I like the Jesus we get to know in Mark, with additional stories from Matthew and Luke. That doesn't mean that I think these synoptic gospels give us much to work with as biographic or historic record as we understand those words today. But they are stories about why Jesus mattered to his disciples and his followers, there and then stories of adults in community confronting the difficulties of life together, communicating as best they can, drawing on the resources of the Holy Spirit that are available to us all, offering the same kind of healing Jesus offered; stories about the followers and disciples, growing into their own humility and courage, loving one another and giving themselves away to strangers.

So I'm starting this sermon with the lectionary passage in Acts 2: 22-32, the book that could have been named Second Luke.

What is this Second Luke story about?

Peter's speech begins: "Men of Israel, I am speaking of Jesus of Nazareth." (I think its okay for women to listen in to this story as if it were male bonding experience.) We can all notice that Peter is concerned with a Jewish audience in contrast to Paul and the gospel writers who wrote in Greek for Gentile audiences and for Hellenized Jews of the Diaspora.

Peter goes on, "Jesus was known to you through miracles, portents, and signs, which God did through Jesus, as you well know." For Peter, anything special about Jesus is attributable to God working through Jesus, not to Jesus as having some supernatural power himself. Whatever Jesus did he did with human powers in response to the guidance of God. His disciples were sent out to do the same kinds of things Jesus did. This opens up the important questions about what we might do if we fully opened ourselves to the transformative power of God in our lives, to what we can and hopefully will embody of God as we live and act.

When the lectionary puts Acts 2: 22-32 in the readings for the Sunday after Easter our attention is steered toward verse 27, "For you will not abandon me to death, nor let your faithful servant suffer corruption." The story in Second Luke was based on Psalm Sixteen, also in the lectionary. The author of this lectionary passage would have us believe that Psalm Sixteen was about Jesus rather than David. This is the same kind of misuse of Hebrew Scripture that significantly shapes the writing of the Gospel of Matthew. In any case, it is worth noting that the idea of dying without the body rotting was an old idea, not a new one applying only to Jesus. It doesn't matter to me that the body of Jesus rotted. He is my Savior for what he said and did before he rotted.

The next verse in Luke's retelling of Psalm 16 is "You have shown me the paths of life; your presence fills me with joy." The comparable verse in Psalm 16 reads, "You will show me the path of life; in your presence is the fulness of joy, at your right hand are pleasures forevermore." I note that Luke's retelling does not include the forevermore part.

"You have shown me the paths of life." This is what matters to me about Jesus. Your Presence fills me with joy." This is my response to the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit that inspired Jesus and the Holy Spirit who inspires me. If we confuse the concept of the Risen Christ with the concept of the Holy Spirit we have a concept referenced to long ago rather than here and now, a concept understood with old concepts in the context of old circumstances. The concept of experiencing God as Holy Spirit works well with here and now salvation, rather than focusing on trying to copy old understandings of salvation.

My path out of my troubles with Easter is illuminated by the phrase, "You have shown me the paths of life." This is an understandable scripture: no magic, here and now focused, dealing with what matters. But it is not an easy scripture.

The paths of life were often brutal and short for a lot of people in the Roman Empire. The experienced story for early Christians included the Jewish revolt that led to the destruction of the Temple, the destruction of Jerusalem, the killing of Jewish leaders and probably some of the disciples and followers of Jesus. The the early Christians were persecuted by the Romans and were also excluded from the synagogues. A lot of their leaders were dead, including Peter and Paul. The Christian path was grim, hidden and secretive

for many Christians. It wasn't fun to live in a country where you may be tortured and killed, fed alive to lions for the amusement of Roman crowds.

All the Christians had was each other. They were in scattered communities with different Christian writings and traditions, with gnostic, coptic and orthodox theologies, among others. There were more than a dozen gospels in circulation, and the later ones were highly fanciful.

Scattered. Confused. Frightened. Enough.

Enough for those people living on Earth today who are living in circumstances as brutal as those of First Century Christians. Enough for people in the United States who are lonely, who feel invisible and uncared for, people who live with suppressed and sometimes expressed rage, people struggling for survival with little hope of access to the resources they need to follow their callings or dreams, people caught up in addictions that distract them from the paths of life.

The four Jewish traditions that remained standing after the genocide of Jerusalem and the oppression that drove the Essenes to hide the Dead Sea Scrolls before dying out, were the followers of John the Baptist, the Pharisees with their synagogue focused worship that was well-suited to the Diaspora, the Samaritans who were a remnant of Israel rather than Judah, and the Christians who had the task of living into and distinguishing their religion from the followers of John and from the synagogue worship of the Pharisees.

Scattered. Confused. Frightened. Enough. Enough guidance from the narrative of Jesus. Enough experience of the lures and Presence of the Holy Spirit. Enough humility to get enough the experience of public shaming. Enough courage to keep the faith in the midst of oppression, even lifetimes of oppression. Enough love and caring so that life together was worth living, even when doing what was needed to survive was hard or boring or shameful as cultures teach shame.

Saving truth was sufficient for the spiritual crisis of the followers of Jesus and it is sufficient for us as well. The early Christians did the best they could with what they had, understood and appreciated what mattered despite any conceptual limitations. We in Seekers are fortunate to have a lot more opportunities, a lot more resources. Let us be thankful for the gifts of life and world we have from the Creator. Let us be thankful for the guidance of Jesus. Let us be thankful for the direct experience we have from God that are parts of our everyday life: caring, hope, grief, trust, love, and so much more.

Let us be thankful for each other and let us do the best we can with what we have been given.