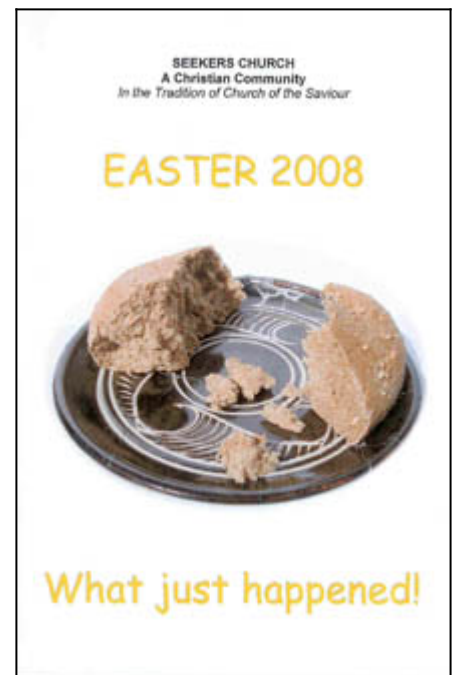


“What Just Happened?” by Marjory Zoet Bankson

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Scriptures

Acts 10:34-43 ...Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.'

Matthew 28:1-10 ...Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Allelujah!

Easter Sunday is the culmination, the pinnacle of the church year. And this ancient proclamation of the resurrection is at the heart of our faith. But what does it mean to say “Christ is risen”???

There’s a natural connection between Easter and Springtime.

Easter is the only church festival set by the moon—the first Sunday, after the first full moon, after the Spring Equinox. Those events happened on consecutive days this year, so Easter seems unusually early. But still, daffodils are up. Buds are popping and the cherry blossoms opening around the tidal basin. Nature suggests a meaning because everything is rising up out of the ground.

Except that there is nothing natural about the resurrection!

Dead bodies go into the ground and they stay there. Mary went to the tomb because that is where Jesus had been sealed up. She went to be close to his battered body. She didn’t go looking for resurrection.

Celebration Circle has given us a tantalizing bulletin (see picture above) and altar installation for this season, and I’ve helped myself to their theme as a title for this sermon: What Just Happened?

Gospel

In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene and “the other Mary” only briefly, after an angel of the Lord has told them the whole story:

I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell the disciples, "He has been raised from the dead."

Then Jesus appears to them, telling them not to be afraid, but to tell the disciples he would be waiting for them in Galilee. I'm sure they turned to each other and in some way asked, "What just happened?"

Our second hymn, "I Come to the Garden Alone," gives us the alternative gospel reading for today. Although that hymn has largely been set aside as promoting private religion and personal piety, it was written as an Easter hymn to tell the story of Mary meeting the risen Christ, as it was understood in the Johannine community. This version was probably written about a century after Jesus died. Notice the differences between the earlier Matthew version and John's:

Mary discovers the empty tomb...(there is no earthquake or angel to unseal the tomb). She gets Simon Peter and another disciple to verify its emptiness, but they don't stay. She literally bumps into a man she doesn't recognize, and asks about Jesus. But when he says her name, she knows. (This is a much more human encounter.) "Teacher!" she responds. (That was how she had known him before the crucifixion.)

"Don't hold on to me," he says, for I am on my way to the Father.

In other words, this encounter between Mary Magdalene and Jesus is a liminal space, set between past and future, now and not yet. Jesus says "I am not who I was. And I am not yet where I will be. But meanwhile, your work is to help the other disciples understand."

What just happened?

What are we to make of this new state of being? This Christ-experience?

In the domination system of her day, no woman could be a legal witness. No woman would have the authority to teach men, to interpret the holiness of God. But both Matthew and John make it quite clear that women were the first witnesses—and that has always been part of our biblical tradition. It's not about personal piety at all! It's about radical inclusion of everybody in this earthly experience of God's presence—a call to ministry, to witness and interpretation.

We can hardly appreciate what an incredible upset of the old system that was— unless we look at our own political scene today. As the presidential campaign has progressed, I have been shocked at the slurs against Hillary Clinton as a woman which were being tolerated in the press, when it seemed that people were being quite careful about racial insinuations. It seemed to me that gender bias was even more deeply ingrained than racial bias—and that makes this resurrection story even more pertinent. Jesus was addressing a deeply ingrained prejudice.

But as I read the papers and listened to the news this week, it's clear to me that racial guns are being brought out too. Obama is being pilloried for statements made from the pulpit by Rev. Jeremiah Wright. I was deeply moved by Obama's speech in response to those charges, AND I hope we all understand that there are things said from this pulpit that all of us may not agree with—but that's no reason to leave a community. The basic message has always been one of love and justice for the poor, Obama said, and that's why he and his wife have stayed in the community at Trinity UCC church in Chicago. (FYI Trinity has now posted those sermons from which the

controversial passages were lifted so you can read them in context.)

Resurrection is NOT a natural event. It must be engaged, chosen and lived. Unconscious prejudice will remain thickly laced through our public life until brave souls dare to claim the radical truth that Jesus proclaimed in his appearance to Mary—that ALL people are included in God's realm. In this liminal space, between the past, where Jesus was teacher and Lord, and the future state of oneness with God, we must encounter Christ directly, again and again.

This past week, Peter and I enjoyed a vacation week in Mexico. I took along a book which I had been saving for Lent. [hold up book] Titled *The Art of Political Murder*, it's the true story of Bishop Gerardi's murder in Guatemala, in April, 1998,—two days after the bishop's report on Guatemala's genocidal war was published. It is a terrible story of that begins with his brutal death, bludgeoned in the garage of his house.

When the Peace Accords of 1996 granted amnesty to all combatants in their 30-year war, the conservative archbishop of Guatemala recalled Bishop Gerardi from exile in Costa Rica and gave him the charge to investigate the truth. Bishop Gerardi knew the risks—and he said “Yes” anyway. It's a Jesus story, full of cynicism, twisted truths and frightened bystanders. There's even a Judas figure, who says to the author of Gerardi, “He was a good man. He only wanted to finish his book.” That four-volume report, titled “Guatemala Never Again” is a strong indictment of the systematic genocide conducted by the military government against the indigenous people of Guatemala. The sections I've read are specific, terrifying and gruesome.

But *The Art of Political Murder* also a resurrection story—of specific brave and diligent people who continued to work on the case in spite of threats and political pressures to stop. In 2001, three military officers were tried and found guilty

of the murder—which only began a string of appeals which finally ended at the Supreme Court in 2007, when the verdict was upheld—by judges who feared for their lives. I believe that the author of this book, Francisco Goldman, has put himself in danger by the thoroughness of his reporting.

I came back from reading this book sick as a dog! I think my body could barely absorb the horror of what people can and will do to each other. But I don't think it's far from what Mary Magdalene, and the early disciples, might have felt.

And for us, here at Seekers, what does it mean to live into the resurrection?

When dreams die and hard work goes unrewarded, when prejudice and bigotry seem to thrive?

How will we be changed, transformed by the power of Christ for the work we are here to do? How will we be renewed in this liminal space— between what has been and what will be?

We all live lives that are larger than Seekers. Like Mary, our missions take place elsewhere and yet we need a community of belief where we can hear the stories, and take in the visual/sensual experience of the living Christ to be empowered for the work we are each given to do.

On Friday, Peter and I went to the Indian Museum with friends for a concert by Buffy Sainte Marie. Born on a Cree Reservation in Saskatchewan, Canada, she was an activist from the Sixties. We went, curious to see and hear her now. The small theater was packed. She was stunning and humorous, but also clear and straight with her critique of the system which had, in so many different ways, conspired to marginalize if not destroy the indigenous people of North America. But her vision was larger than that too. She sang for consideration of women and children everywhere. One of her last songs, "Workin

for the Government,” sent the arrow home for most of the people there.

As we stood to leave, Peter turned to the Director (who was sitting just behind us) and said, “Thank you for this. I’ve worked for the government, been a Vietnam Vet, and am part of a little church here in town. This was a great way to recognize Good Friday.” The Director looked a little startled, and then said, “Thanks. It’s a great country sometimes.”

I felt SO grateful that she could sing to a packed house in a government-sponsored museum on the mall without being afraid for her life—because there have been people willing to stand in the breach between then and now.

What just happened?

Christ met Mary by an empty tomb. A frightened woman was empowered.

Her life with Jesus showed her the way, but she was changed by this encounter with the risen Christ.

Let me close with these words from Jane Kenyon:

*The God of curved space,
the dry God, is not going to help us,
but the son
whose blood spattered the hem of his mother’s robe.*

Perhaps our bulletin cover pictures point to the way for us.

Amen.