

“Just Imagine!”

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News reporters have a tough time of it, when they're giving accounts of events that seem stranger than fiction. We who consider ourselves critical thinkers tend to cast serious doubt on such reports and wonder about the reporter. Just imagine that you've picked up an account of a reporter relaying events that happened four decades ago, with not much in between to let us know whether this reporter should be given more than a passing thought. That's the pickle that we're in with The Gospel According to Mark. It's the earliest account we have of the life and teachings of Jesus, and it's not an eyewitness story.

Mark wrote sometime between 65 and 75 of the Common Era, long after Jesus lived and died. He relied on what we call oral tradition, the careful passing of stories from generation to generation. What happens to the truth, we wonder, when one person tells another, “I have an amazing story for you,” and then the listener tells another, and so it goes? With kids, we call it “the telephone game.” What is spoken into the first ear almost never resembles what comes out of the last mouth. But long before books were printed, long before newspapers were published, folks had no other way to keep stories alive but through telling and re-telling them. They probably listened much better than we do today, because they had to; but this is no guarantee that Mark's story of the life of Jesus was any more accurate than if umpteen reporters had interviewed him and witnessed his life from birth to death to whatever. Yet across the millennia, Mark's story has been told and re-told, so deeply does it hold *hope*. I read Mark's story of what is now called Easter.

And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, brought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back: for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.” And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them: and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

Astonishing! How could it be? Such are the likely responses at the first hearing of what is at the heart of the celebration of Easter, the legendary resurrection of Jesus of Galilee from death to life. You heard the story from the Gospel According to Mark, the earliest of the recorded Gospels. Each of the Four Gospels of the Bible as we know it offers its own version of what happened.

What do you believe? It's Easter after all!

Do you believe in *you*? Are *you* real? Did you miraculously grow from a fertilized egg and after nine months decide it was time to be born into this life as you know it? Astonishing! How could it be? But here you are.

Do you believe in sunshine? Well, maybe not this spring. But when it does come out of its hiding place, we can feel it; we can see the earth and one another basking in its glow. It warms us and brightens our prospects for the day.

What about crocus? Do you believe in that little flower bursting through the soil against all odds? There are a few colorful blossoms raising their heads just outside this church. Yet, hear the words of Piet Hein, that 20th century Danish poet and scientist, registering his opinion:

We glibly talk of nature's laws
But do things have a natural cause?

Black earth turned into yellow crocus
Is undiluted hocus-pocus.

Do you believe in heaven and earth? Well, maybe it depends on what you mean by heaven or earth. I'm of the same mind as Mark Belletini:

"...the heaven I see daily overhead never argues with me. It just tumbles clouds through my eyes and yours...And the earth I walk never argues with me either. It mostly just explodes with buds and petals like some out-of-control fountain."

Heaven and earth are real. Crocuses are real. Sunshine is real. You and I are real.

Then there's the matter of resurrection, resurrection from death to life, that gnawing story of Easter. There are many reports of the life and death and life of Jesus. Mark's is simply the oldest. They have all melted into legend, and legend has a way of meandering like the currents of a river over time. Legend has a way of shedding its fluid quality, and before you know it, it's hard and fast belief.

I'm guessing that most of us here this morning don't believe that any historical Jesus died, was laid in a tomb, pushed back the heavy boulder sealing it, and walked out into the warm sunshine. Yet I wonder if our literal reading of Mark's story and the other Gospel stories doesn't hold us in our own tombs, tombs of lackluster knowing. I wonder if we might not find a deeper engagement with the story of Easter and its meaning for our own lives if we stretched the weary muscles of our religious imagination.

Ann Ulanov, Protestant theologian and Jungian analyst, and her late husband, Barry Ulanov, scholar of English Literature, observed that "Imagining is always rooted in the body, in time, in history." It's impossible to construct a notion of life over death that is other than physical. Even our imagination is constrained by our reason.

However unbelievable the reported events of that time, something extraordinary happened, something that bids us at least to understand that those who were closest to Jesus, those who were despairing at his death, those who visited his tomb in the early hours of the morning, were transformed by the presence, in whatever mode, of a human being who preached the good news of love, who practiced what he preached, and who paid the price that came down on his head as a threat to the powers and principalities of his time.

The Ulanovs also asked:

“...is it true? Did it really happen, then, in Jerusalem, that believable unbelievable, impossible actual event, the resurrection?”

Their response?

“The answer does not come to us in the ordinary way of knowledge. As the resurrection requires a rearrangement of our understanding of what it means to live and to die, of being itself, so does it command a transformation of our ways of knowing.”

Perhaps what matters is not some hard truth of what happened or didn't happen, but that which unfolds in the telling and retelling of a story of unexpected life for which we're all hungry, life that breaks through the hardness of tombs in whatever form we experience tombs, and love that breathes through the defiance of stone however stones are rolled to ensure against it.

We don't have to believe that a long ago rabbi who preached and lived love and was executed by power mongers who couldn't handle it walked out of his tomb into the sunshine of life in order to believe in resurrection. Resurrection happens when any of us moves through a space of hopelessness into a space of hope, when any of us moves out of our tombs of despair into the light of day, when any of us comes alive again. Just imagine! Just imagine what is possible for you and me.

Happy Easter. Amen.

Sources

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