

Year B, 2018
Fr. Robert D. Arnold

Easter Day
St. Mark 16:1-8

✠ In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

You and I live in an historical period that is more like the 1st century when Jesus was born than any time in between. It does not seem possible, nor is it logical, that that should be the case. The rise and fall of the Roman Empire is a part of that ancient world of the past that can, periodically, raise its ugly head once again as it did in the German Reich of the 1930s and 40s. Biblical scholarship, archaeology, and a concerted effort on the part of historians over the last 200 years (especially the last 100) has brought more to light of the life and times of the historical Jesus than what was known 400 years after His death...to the point that we may tell His story with more accuracy than ever before.

He comes as one unknown to the small villages of Galilee. He is watched by the cold, hard eyes of peasants who have lived long enough to know the dramatic line that exists between poverty and destitution, between freedom and slavery. He looks like a beggar, yet His eyes lack the proper cringe, His voice the proper whine, His walk the proper shuffle. He speaks about the Kingdom of God and they listen as much out of curiosity as anything else. They know all about rule and power, about kingdom and empire; but they know it in terms of taxes and debt, malnutrition and sickness, economic oppression and demon possession. They're curious to know what this Kingdom of God can do for a lame child, a blind parent, a leprous exile, a demented soul. Jesus heals a man of palsy, a boy who is thrust to the ground by his epilepsy, and exorcises a tortured soul who chains himself to the tombstones out on the edge of town and the villagers take a second look and listen this time with some degree of amazement. He is invited, as honor demands, to dine at the home of the village leader. He goes, as everybody would expect; but at the next town, He goes instead to the home of a dispossessed woman. Not quite proper, but it would be unwise to criticize a magician, a healer or exorcist. The villagers could maybe broker this power to its surroundings, like as they tried to do at Capernaum, coax this Kingdom of God business to locate in their town, and be a place where people from all around would come for healing, a center that would launch other support services and everybody would benefit, even,

maybe, that dispossessed woman herself. But the next day He leaves them, and now they wonder about this divine kingdom that has no respect for their protocols—a kingdom, as He has said, not just for the poor, like themselves, but for the destitute, the beggars, the outcasts. But some say nothing at all and ponder the possibilities of catching up with Jesus before he gets too far ahead.

For a while Jesus had not always seen things that way. Earlier He had received John's baptism and accepted His message of God as the imminent apocalyptic judge. But the Jordan river, where John the Baptist was located, reminded Jesus of Moses and the journey of the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt, through the wilderness, across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. Herod Antipas moved swiftly to execute John, and there was no apocalyptic consummation. So Jesus began to speak of God not as imminent apocalypse but as present healing. To those first followers from the peasant villages of Galilee who asked how to repay Him for His cures, He gave a peculiar answer: You thought you lost the image of God, but you haven't; it's only been covered in dirt. Give thanks to God, for your faith has made you well. He even went so far as to instruct others to take this Kingdom to others. He is not its sole proprietor and you are not its brokers. It is, was, and always will be available to any who want it. Dress as I do, but do not beg. Bring a miracle and request a table. Accept their hospitality.

That kingdom society sought to rebuild top-down society from the bottom up, on principles of Jesus's own actions—of eating with high and low alike; free healing and teaching brought directly to the peasant's homes and free sharing of whatever they had in return. This deliberate combination of healing and meal, miracle and table fellowship, responsive compassion and universal love flew in the face of not only the strict purity regulations of Judaism's laws, or even the patriarchal societies of the Mediterranean with their determinations of honor and shame and hierarchies of patron and servant, but even of our basic and perennial determination to draw lines, invoke boundaries, establish hierarchies, and maintain discrimination. It did not try to start a revolution, only to practice what it preached—no Gentile and Jew, male or female, rich or poor, slave or free. Distinctions were to be simply ignored. It was unacceptable in the first century as it would be today—there, here, or anywhere.

What happened to Jesus was probably as predictable as what had already happened to John the Baptist. It also seems clear that Jesus confronted as He entered the holy city, probably for the first time in His life, the rich magnificence of the Temple, and with a whip of chords symbolically destroyed its perfectly legitimate business of animal sacrifice in the name of this free-forming, open Kingdom of God. Such an act, in the midst of a Passover festival—a festival that celebrated Jewish liberation from the oppression of an earlier empire—would be enough to bring Jewish and Roman authorities to agree on arrest, conviction and crucifixion. If it were to happen today, it might get reported on the nightly news; back then it went swiftly, brutally, secretly, indifferently.

“What could not have been predicted and might not have been expected was that the end was not the end. Those who had originally experienced divine power through his vision and his example continued to do so after his death.”¹

“Without Easter, we wouldn’t know about Jesus. If his story had ended with his crucifixion, he most likely would have been forgotten—another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions. Perhaps a trace or two about him would have shown up in [the writings of the historian] Josephus or in Jewish rabbinical sources, but that would have been all. Without Easter, we wouldn’t even have ‘Good Friday,’ for there would have been no abiding community to remember and give meaning to his death.”²

The gospel stories of Easter differ as to the facts, not unlike the diverging testimonies of witnesses to an auto accident, but are still reliable witnesses to the basic factuality of the event. (The accident really happened). There are some that insist that you take these events literally and that every detail is factual and infallibly true. There are many more who don’t worry about whether there were two angels at the tomb, one angel, or a messenger boy dressed in white who delivers the good news—“Jesus ‘who was crucified’ by the authorities ‘has been raised’ by God. The meaning is that God has said ‘yes’ to Jesus and ‘no’ to the powers who killed him. God

1 John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, (HarperSanFrancisco: 1994), p 197.

2 Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week*, (HarperSanFrancisco: 2006), p. 190.

has vindicated Jesus. His followers are promised: ‘You will see him.’”³

Like those first followers of Jesus, we too, have experienced something we might call His divine power, His deep love, His healing, affirming touch, His calm in the midst of a storm, His forgiveness in the absolution of sin. Maybe, once, you thought better of doing something you shouldn’t. Maybe, once, you remembered something Jesus did or said, and tried in some way to emulate that. Maybe you picked up the books and helped home the kid that got beat up behind the school. Maybe you sat all day with a neighbor whose little girl underwent heart surgery. Or maybe someone did that for you.

That is what Easter is...because that is what Easter does.

³ *Ibid*, p. 197.