

The Unfinished Resurrection

The risen Christ waits to be found and served among the poor

By DONNA SCHAPER

“Go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you” (Matt 28:7).

“Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40).

Jesus, the risen Jew, the ordinary man, is on his way to Galilee. He is not dead, and the people are marveling and wondering what will happen in Galilee. When Jesus gets there, he announces that he is present not just in his own body, but also in the naked and the stranger. Jesus has risen in the outsider. If you want to know the rising, find the outsider. Jesus will be there.

A Jewish Easter

Matthew’s account of Easter morning (Matt 28:1-10) brings us to the heart of Judaism as it becomes the incubator of Christianity. Two women go into a tomb. They intend to practice a Jewish ritual of old-fashioned undertaking, applying herbs to the dead body. They do not complete their ritual. It is left unfinished as the reality about Jesus not being dead penetrates their heart and their culture.

The life of Jesus is unfinished. It completes itself in Galilee, in the poor, the naked and the oppressed. The Resurrection completes itself in those parts of ourselves that come up naked, oppressed and impoverished — no matter how rich we are.

Those Jewish women must have been very confused. Jews celebrate the Passover at the same time of year we celebrate the Resurrection. The original meaning of “Pesach” (Passover) comes from the skipping/stumbling of a newborn lamb, which shepherds imitated in the spring



Illustration by Julie Lonneman

ritual of a skipping dance, seen as God’s dance. That Passover dance skips over the homes of “God wrestlers” who come through a doorway smeared with blood, like a womb experience. There are deep connections between the Easter story, where our God dances over death, and the Pesach story, where blood is transformed into liberation. In each case we come through a dark passage into a kind of dawn. We have to move — and be moved — to see the unfinished resurrection.

Easter is in Galilee

If we want to understand Easter, we need only head to our nearest version of Galilee and there stand with the bloodied outsiders. With the poor, we are bloodied but unbowed. The poor have no monopoly on outsider status. Many middle-class people also have the opportunity to suffer in Galilee. In suffering, with the outsiders, we find the risen Jesus. Suffering is an equal-opportunity employer. When we un-numb ourselves to suffering and refuse to shun it, when we enter into it with hope, we find Jesus.

Even clergy need to find a way to truly enter Galilee and its suffering. As clergy, we need to be free to embarrass our institutions on their own behalf. We rise as we move to the periphery; we stumble as we stay obedient to the marching orders of the dead ways. We need to dance our way out of obligation into freedom.

The route is as ordinary as the route to Galilee, as simple as listening to those who have been silenced by the state or the church or just by plain old peer pressure. To hear the dance out of the grave, we learn to sing a strange song in a strange land and not to care who is listening. Easter gives us spiritual backbone, the kind that lifts us above the demands of all the people who would like to tell us what to say and what to think. There we behave differently, because we are freed. We may also be smeared with blood, but that blood itself will be our liberation.

Easter maybe people

I often say that I am an Easter maybe person and an Alleluia definite person. I see Easter as a great sign of the Jesus story and its triumph. There is nothing finished about Easter. It continues as we journey to Galilee ourselves. The women at the grave couldn’t finish their ritual, nor can we finish our rising.

Easter is about the finished-ness of Jesus. He really did die. But that death was not his completion. He lives on in the outsiders. On the cross, Jesus did not say, “It is completed.” He said, “It is finished.” You can complete something, like an education or growing spinach from seed to salad. You can complete a day, but you don’t want to finish a day. To understand Easter, you have to understand that some things get ruined and don’t get raised. Some people never get noticed, or if they do, they get punished for being different. Jesus put up with the cross so we would begin to notice. The women couldn’t finish



their ritual, but they did finish their liberation. They may have still been filled with maybes, but they were differently filled with them. A spark of hope had been ignited.

Alleluia people

Easter maybe people can still be Alleluia people: We do so by borrowed experience more often than not. I love those undertaking women who showed up at the tomb to retrieve their spices so they could use them on another body and were surprised and confused at the way the tomb was empty. How, they say again, can these things be? We came here to do an ordinary cultural thing, a Jewish thing, a regular thing, and to go back to our regular lives a bit sadder, a bit more worn-down. We had hoped for more but, once again, we were told a lie, a fib, and an untruth. We let ourselves have our hopes raised by Jesus and once again our hopes were dashed.

But this Sunday morning, we came in empty and left full. We left dancing over death. We were changed. Old-timers say we are washed in the blood of the lamb.

Easter maybe people who are willing to be Alleluia people — joyous people, anyway — have to borrow experience to live beyond the fibs. I want to name a few fibs that give me my Alleluia. It is *through* the fibs and not *around* them that the Alleluia comes. It is through the bloody birth canal, not around it, that we find our way to Alleluia.

Fibs and fears

I once watched an older man castigate a younger one for spending all his time on the computer and not living in what the older man declared was the “real world.” What is real about one world, one geography, one time, one space? Is not the international, multivocal Internet a more real world than the kid’s backyard? I think so.

Another fear. What is so scary about an American nation that tips to a white minority by 2032 or so? Isn’t that a wonderful idea, one worthy of Alleluia? I understand the Easter maybe part of this fact. Maybe it will cause a lot of trouble. Maybe people



will kill over it. Surely we are willing to hate over it. But: “Lo, I tell you a mystery: In the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised.” A new world is coming: Can’t you see it? Can you also love it?

For those of us who are white, will we be safe if we are not a majority? Maybe, maybe not. Maybe we will be judged by how safe we let other minorities be. Our history of racial abuse is as convoluted as it is tragic. Calling a woman a mulatto was once license to rape her. First white men birthed the mulatto girl, then because she was of mixed race, they raped her again, reminding one ever so much of the way we use immigrants and then hate and criminalize them for our use of them.

Some of the fibs and their fears are even more sophisticated. One of our best New Sanctuary Immigrant Rights Movement organizers told me this week that I should wear my collar when we visited the Manhattan district attorney because that would make it look like the issue of deportation from Rikers Island prison was a moral issue, as though it was not already a moral and religious issue. Lo, I tell you a mystery. Trumpets may sound. People might see. People might go to Galilee and touch the hand of an undocumented person. Alleluia! Jesus did not lie to us. He showed us the way to resurrection, and not just our own but the one that transcends the false sense of “our own.”

Finished but incomplete

When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he did not mean that it was complete. He meant that you can lean into hope. You can look forward and not just backward into injury upon injury upon injury, insulated by disbelief and cynicism. You can lean toward Galilee and lean toward the outsiders. When you look out, you can imagine another kind of world, even

be desperate for it. Jesus meant that we can drop all this cargo we carry. We can go on.

Poet Greg Kumera puts it this way: “The world needs your cargo almost as much as you need to lose it.” The route to Alleluia is here. Dump the cargo. If you leave despair sit for too long in your belly, it will spoil you. Dump the cargo. How? Find the naked, the strange and the different and love them, the way Jesus loved you. You will find Jesus there.

Many back into the Alleluia of resurrection because they don’t know where else to go. When something is finished, you know you have gone too far to go back. It is like a baby in the birth canal. You may wish you had never become pregnant in the first place, but you also know there is no longer anything you can do but give birth. The womb is a lot like the Easter tomb: It doesn’t finish its work so much as begin it, inexorably.

Easter is also a kind of prehabilitation, instead of a rehabilitation. Instead of letting our bodies and souls get bent into an injured state, we lean toward healthy spiritual posture. We lean against the injury and do spiritual rehab, bending ourselves another way.

Easter is ...

Jesus rises whenever power is used well, cargo dispelled, earth shaken at its core by the tremble of a trumpet sounding, “This is enough.” You sing Alleluia. You are trumpeted and twinkled into another version of time.

The late author May Sarton talks about how she finally became herself. For too long, she says, she wore other people’s faces. Not everyone is free to wear his or her own face. When we begin the Easter experience, we wear our own faces, and those whose faces we can barely look into also wear their own. All are free from death. Alleluias ring out, even in the world of lies and maybes.

This is resurrection.

This is Easter.

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