

Easter Sunday
March 31, 2013
Isaiah 65:17-25
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
LUKE 24:1-12

WHAT IF IT'S TRUE?

What if it's true?

What if there was and is no body left in the tomb of Jesus of Nazareth? What if some of Jesus' disciples, completely contrary to their own expectations, experienced their rabbi, their master, their Lord, who they *knew* had been so thoroughly tortured and brutally executed the previous Friday, *alive* again on Sunday? And what if their widely-witnessed experience of him was different from any pre-existing concept in their theology or culture or that of the dominant culture of the eastern Mediterranean world of their time? For what they testified to was not a resuscitated corpse (like Lazarus), or a ghost (like that of the Old Testament leader Samuel in 1 Samuel 28) or of the bodies of the dead at The End of Time (as expected by Martha in John 11) or of a supposedly "immortal soul" "liberated" from its body (as in pagan Greek philosophy).

What if Jesus' new life was so new and different that his followers could not at first recognize him or describe what they were observing? Sometimes people today only observe and document new data in the categories of what they expect to see, do not recognize as tunes arrangements of notes which are foreign to them, and have no idea what a smell, taste or touch which is totally new to them is or means. So it was for Jesus' first followers, and so it is, still, for us in 2013. If it is true that Jesus is raised from the dead, what does that mean?

Something happened. Without that *Something* no one after what we call -- because of Jesus -- the First Century would have ever heard of Jesus. Because of that *Something*, a man named Saul who had been a vigorous persecutor of the followers of Jesus did a dramatic U-turn with his life and became St. Paul, who literally translated the Good News of that *Something* into a language (Greek) which could be read, heard and understood by people far beyond the Holy Land. Because of that *Something* that happened, St. Paul used his considerable intellectual gifts to frame this totally unexpected Good News in ways which challenged *both* of the cultures of this multi-cultural man, Judaism and Greek culture, but was also understandable to both cultures.

It is Paul writing to the tiny Christian church in Corinth, Greece perhaps 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection and about 10 years before the first of the Gospels was written who gives us the first full systematic reflection on that Something that happened, the resurrection of Christ, in Chapter 15 of his First Letter to the Corinthians, a little part of which we just heard.

In this letter Paul declares that God's invasion of the world has gone farther even than envisioned by the prophet who had written this morning's passage from the Hebrew Scriptures over 500 years earlier. God will wipe away not merely "*premature*" death, but death itself. Not only, as Isaiah Chapter 65 assures us, will people no longer "bear children for calamity", but as children of God the faithful in Christ will be *made alive* in Christ in a way which can *never* be quenched.

Paul *assumes* in his discourse on the resurrection that Jesus' tomb was empty, that Jesus' actual body had itself been radically transformed and that there was nothing dead left about him. Paul himself experienced the risen Christ, as did many others, but he did not himself witness the empty tomb on Easter Sunday morning. We have other sources for that narrative, sources which may have been themselves "buried" in some parts of the tradition because of *who* those witnesses were.

Today there is growing interest in "alternative narratives" about Jesus, specifically *women's* voices about Jesus, but to actually find women's voices we do not have to look at tiny scraps of Coptic written on parchment of uncertain antiquity or origin, or embrace apocryphal so-called "gospel stories", or even read fanciful contemporary novels. *We only have to listen to the actual four canonical Gospels themselves*, which start their accounts of Jesus' resurrection and its impact quite differently than does Paul: with the experiences of *women*.

Paul does not mention any resurrection appearances by Jesus to women at all, unlike the Gospels. Paul also does not mention who came to Jesus' tomb "on the first day of the week, at early dawn:" "only" women, as testified in all four Gospels. The women came with absolutely no expectations of Good News of any kind. They came to mourn and to anoint the dead body of the man they respected and cared for above all others. But the spices they had bought and brought to anoint a dead man *never got used* for him.

The women were (understandably) "perplexed"; what had happened to Jesus' body? Then, Luke tells us, they were "terrified" just as the shepherds had been in the fields near Bethlehem 30 years before when *they* experienced angels telling *them* totally

unexpected Good News. (The male disciples were so terrified on Easter morning that they hadn't even shown up, given that they might also have been seized by the Romans.)

And then the angels asked the women, “*Why do you seek the living among the dead?*” and reminded them of Jesus' prediction of his death and resurrection. So, the women ran and told the guys -- who, Luke candidly tells us, blew them off. “Nonsense”, the men thought. “*Women, who can believe them?*”

Interesting, isn't it, who God chose. In ancient Hebrew, like modern Spanish, if you have a crowd of 99 women and one man, you use the *masculine* plural subject pronoun: “they, masculine.” In First Century Palestine, if 99 women and one man witnessed a crime, only the *man's* testimony was admissible in court.

So who did *God* pick as the first to witness and testify to this amazing Something? Not prosperous, respected, sympathetic male members of the establishment like Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea. *Women*. Probably illiterate, as many women of that time and place were. Not men with *gravitas*, with degrees and pedigrees. Women, whose testimony would have been laughed out of court. *But not out of the Bible*.

I think God called those women to be the first witnesses because for the men to believe, they not only had to believe the unexpectedly wonderful news of Christ's new life, they had to believe *women*. Which means they as well as the women had to *change* their whole way of thinking about *life*, and not just about *Jesus's* new life.

This profound change is still being worked through in our world 2,000 years later: respect for the persons and voices of *all* of God's children, including those whom society has scorned and mocked just as the people at the foot of the cross scorned and mocked Jesus himself. New life at Easter means new life for ALL who turn to Christ in faith. ALL. It's not just Jesus' death which is “so over”: it's also oppression and prejudice of all kinds. Their ultimate powers have died and they are being buried. What is being raised up is a growing wave of affirmation of the possibilities for love and leadership in every human being. That new life is still emerging, and every person is invited to take part in this new creation.

Back at Christmas, also in Luke's Gospel, we also heard unusual voices, the voices of peasants: the shepherds, who said “*Let us go now* to Bethlehem and see this thing which has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” On Easter, the women *went* to the tomb on their own initiative. Spurred by the women's story, Simon Peter *went* to the tomb to *see for himself*. He later saw Christ himself, and came to understand

that the old Peter -- the Peter who had denied Christ three times -- had been “buried” and a *new* Peter -- a courageous and eloquent leader who *would* be faithful to the end -- had been raised up by Christ.

We are invited to undertake the same journey in our *own* lives. What in our personal stories has been “buried” which needs to be transformed and raised up by God? Perhaps we have literally buried someone we love and need to hear Christ’s reassurance of life beyond this life. Maybe we have metaphorically “buried” our specific hopes for a living family member or friend, and need to hear and see God’s plan in action for new life for that person.

Maybe we have metaphorically buried some hope of our own -- hope for the big promotion, tenure, success, fame -- or perhaps some of us have “buried” our hopes for a marriage, a job, good health, financial stability -- and need to hear, see and *experience* God’s plan for *new life for us, now*. Maybe some of us almost feel as if we ourselves are *in* a tomb created by our own addiction or someone else’s, and need the reality-based hope which comes from letting our Higher Power roll away the stone from the door of our tomb.

Some illiterate, low-status, Palestinian Jewish women are running up to us, tugging at our sleeves and saying, “*Come and see! The tomb is empty!*” And then they look earnestly into each of our eyes and say, “If *this* tomb is empty, what *other* tombs might be empty also by the power of God? What *other* unexpected new life might be raised up *this Easter*? If God can do this, what else can God do?”

What if it’s true? What might it mean to you?

Come and see!

The Rev. Dr. Francis A. Hubbard
Christ Episcopal Church
New Brunswick, New Jersey