

Divergence on the Lectionary - Easter Sunday, Year B (Principal Service)

First Reading

Acts 10:34–43

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (ESV)

Or

Jeremiah 31:1–6

“At that time, declares the LORD, I will be the God of all the clans of Israel, and they shall be my people.”

Thus says the LORD:

“The people who survived the sword
found grace in the wilderness;
when Israel sought for rest,
the LORD appeared to him from far away.
I have loved you with an everlasting love;
therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.
Again I will build you, and you shall be built,
O virgin Israel!
Again you shall adorn yourself with tambourines
and shall go forth in the dance of the merrymakers.
Again you shall plant vineyards
on the mountains of Samaria;

the planters shall plant
and shall enjoy the fruit.
For there shall be a day when watchmen will call
in the hill country of Ephraim:
'Arise, and let us go up to Zion,
to the LORD our God.'" (ESV)

Second Reading

Colossians 3:1–4

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. (ESV)

Or

Acts 10:34–43 (See Above)

Gospel Text

John 20:1–18

Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said

to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, “Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her. (ESV)

Or

Mark 16:1–8

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—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 alarmed. And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. 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, just as he told you.” And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

I think that reading this passage to study it, we do well to place it in some context. This speech comes when Peter visits the centurion, Cornelius. You remember the setting. Peter was on the roof, hungry, and he has a vision, a great sheet filled with all sorts of animals descends from heaven and God says, “Peter, kill and eat.” Peter replies, “Never, Lord, I’ve never eaten anything unclean.” And God says, “What I have made clean, do not call (make) unclean.” (It’s usually translated “call unclean” but the word is translated as “defile” in a much more transitive sense everywhere else in the Bible, so I think “make unclean” makes better sense.

So Peter then receives word that Cornelius wants to see him and he goes, and when Cornelius tells him about his own dream and why he'd asked Peter to come, our reading is what Peter said in reply.

First thing to note. In our reading, Peter is speaking to a Gentile, a powerful Gentile. Peter isn't explaining anything to other Jews, it's as if he's thinking aloud in front of Cornelius and his family. "Ahhh! Now I get it! I understand what that dream meant!"

And then he goes on to preach the Gospel to a Gentile. I think that what we get here is the earliest form of the Gospel, that Jesus was anointed by God, that He went about doing good and healing, that He was put to death "on a tree" (a death bearing a particular curse, per Deut. 21:22-23, and which Paul cites, Gal. 3:13), that He was raised from the dead, and that He commanded that forgiveness of sin be preached in and through His Name. That's the Gospel in a nutshell, and probably all that was preached at times in the first months and years after Jesus' ascension.

And it's preached to a Gentile. It's not the first time it's preached to a Gentile. Philip gets that honor in Acts 8, but we don't hear the content of that message from Philip. We do from Peter.

Peter basically summarizes everything that Luke wrote in his first book, his Gospel. That he does so to a Gentile *long before God calls Saul/Paul to go to the Gentiles*, is incredibly important. In Year C, I wrote at some length about what I believe to be one of Luke's larger purposes in contributing a third Gospel to those that already existed (he clearly knew Matthew and Mark's gospels) and then also adding on another book, The Acts of the Apostles. That purpose being to try to heal a breach that was growing wider and wider between Jewish and Gentile Christians. I won't try to go into all of that now, but I'll try to put some links to those other discussions at the end of this.

What matters here (well, not the only thing, but an important thing) is that Luke's version of Peter's speech invokes the main elements that he sees binding up the divided Jewish and Gentile Christians. First, Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit. This ties Jesus back firmly into His Jewish roots. Luke reminds his readers that it is the same Spirit that moved over the waters and throughout the Hebrew Scriptures that empowered Jesus to do what He did. This speaks to both Jewish and Gentile believer, because the Holy Spirit was so active and prevalent in their gatherings. Both groups are experiencing powerfully and immediately the same Spirit that worked through Jesus. Then Peter reminds the reader that it was the prophets who foresaw all that Jesus had done. To Jewish believers this is a reminder that Jesus is one of them, to Gentile believers, a reminder that they did not emerge *ex nihilo*, that the Gospel they know came from the Jews.

All neatly wrapped up in the earliest form of the preaching of the Gospel, and preached by Peter, not Paul, to a Gentile. This matters a lot because Paul was such a point of contention between the Jewish and Gentile groups in early Christianity. Luke reminds his readers that nothing Paul did had not been done first by Peter. (This isn't the only time Luke does this in Acts.)

That's all well and good, but what does that purpose of Luke's have to do with us today? Here's how I see it.

In my experience and study there is no greater healer of division than the Holy Spirit. Luke saw it, and I've seen it. My favorite historical example is the Azusa Street revival. In 1907, William Seymour led a revival in a repurposed warehouse that helped birth the modern pentecostal movement in Christianity. William Seymour, a black man, led white and black people into the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. People sat on benches made of planks set on buckets. Men sat side by side with women they didn't know. Black people and white people didn't just worship in the same building, they sat next to one another. Nobody cared. It was *scandalous*. When the Holy Spirit falls we really are "one in the Spirit."

I meet weekly with a group of men from another church. They're a lot more conservative than I am. But we work together because I recognize the Spirit at work in them and they see it in me, and so we can sit in fellowship around our breakfast table. We don't get bogged down in doctrinal or political differences because we know there's something bigger binding us.

I don't know about you, but I'd love to see Luke's vision of a church united by the Holy Spirit heal the divisions that confront us these days.

Or (alternate first reading)

Our reading from Jeremiah comes from the portion of the book called by some the "Book of Consolation" or the "Small Consolation," basically chapters 30 and 31. I should note at the outset that scholars have disagreed about the authorship of these chapters, offering a variety of theories as to their source. Some see them as a later addition to the book, others see a "Jeremiatic kernel" in them on which someone has amplified. Others see some of these chapters as coming from the prophet, while excluding certain verses, while others consider them all to be from Jeremiah himself, and treat those particular verses as the pinnacle of his thought. The verses in question are these.

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” (Jeremiah 31:31–34, ESV)

What troubles scholars is the truth that chapters 30 and 31 of Jeremiah are so thematically different in the hope that they offer from the rest of the book, which one writer described as “all disaster.” But I’ve read enough of the discussion of those verses to have come down on the side of those who see all of these two chapters as from the prophet, including those two verses. I do, however believe that they were given/written later than the place in which they occur in the book.

What is lacking in almost any scholarly discussion of prophetic books is an understanding of inspiration, *any* understanding of inspiration. While these chapters are very different in tone from the rest of Jeremiah’s work, it is quite understandable to me that Jeremiah might have been led to speak thus, especially in the years following the overthrow of Jerusalem, which is why I would date our own reading later than its location among the other chapters (as some scholars would also do).

Having said all that, how are we to read this passage in light of its assignment to Easter Sunday? It seems almost too easy to point to the promise of restoration to Israel, now destroyed by the Chaldeans, and suggest that this theme is characteristic of Easter. I find myself searching and searching for something more complex, more challenging, and finding little. Still, this is what I have noted.

God speaks to Israel as to an individual. While some scholars think that “Israel” refers only to the Northern Kingdom, I agree with those who think that Jeremiah’s vision of Israel goes back to the time when all the tribes were united and all were called “Israel.” This is a pre-monarchical vision of the nation, which is consistent with the theme of distrust of the monarchy that runs throughout the prophetic tradition in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Thus personified “Israel” really does evoke the individual, Jacob, whom God loves “with an everlasting love.” And in Jacob/Israel all will be blessed when God restores them as one. Here I think is a theme we can really latch onto for Easter. Because Jesus’

resurrection is our resurrection. As we die with Him, so we are raised with Him. The love that the Father has for the Son He has for all of us. Reading Jeremiah on Easter reminds me, reminds us, that this Sunday is not only about His emergence from the tomb, but our own as well. And now I wish I'd actually preached on Jeremiah while I was still in active ministry. But I'm sure I never did.

Second Reading

Such a short little reading! In a less serious setting I might suggest that after the Tolstoy-like Gospel readings of the last few weeks and during Holy Week, the choosers of our lessons just decided to give us a little break. But I wouldn't do that. Would I?

Only slightly more seriously, as I read and re-read this passage praying for something meaningful to say about it, the first thing that kept coming to mind was a saying I used to hear sometimes in North Carolina. "Some people are just so heavenly minded, they're no earthly good!" You know the sort they mean. That person who drifts through life blissfully unaware of the pain and confusion around them because they've "set their mind on things above."

Of course, I don't think that's what the author of Colossians means at all. No indeed.

On the contrary, the one who sets their mind on things above becomes a dynamo, with a heart set on seeing the Kingdom, in which they already live, manifest ever more fully on earth. Hidden with Christ in God (Take a moment to create a visual image of that. When I do it takes my breath away.) they draw on an inexhaustible well of life and energy to bring the Kingdom into being.

Of course, some will still say they're "too heavenly minded" because they eschew worldly methods to try to bring a Kingdom result. They will decline to try to use political power to create heavenly realities. Like Jeremiah above and the whole of the prophetic tradition, they will recognize that such earthly hierarchies can never impose peace from above. They can never engender the true knowledge of God that brings change of heart.

But they will work. Joyfully, tirelessly, they will work to bring the Kingdom that Jesus died to inaugurate. They will "run with endurance the race that is set before them, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of their faith, who, for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Good Friday made this goal a reality. Easter Day declares that reality to the world, and invites us to set our eyes on the joy set before us as well.

Gospel Text

(John 20:1-18)

I am glad that in every lectionary year the Resurrection Narrative from John is listed first. There is much to glean from all of the synoptic tellings of that Sunday morning, but none is as personal and moving as the moment Jesus speaks the name, “Mary.” It is to me the perfect mate to Jesus’ call to His beloved friend, “Lazarus, come out!” In John 11 Jesus cries out in a “great voice,” and here He speaks in a voice barely above a whisper, but He calls just as loudly, “Come out.”

“Come out of your grief. Come out of your despair. The tomb that held Lazarus is broken forever and a new world emerges with me into the daylight. Come out.” And it’s all said so gently.

Mary’s encounter with Jesus is missing from all the synoptic Gospels. But she was a member of the Johannine community, and so it is understandable that a story so personal and precious would not have been widely enough circulated to find its way into the sources used by the synoptic evangelists. Some even suggest that it was Mary who transcribed the remembrances of the Beloved Disciple and wrote the gospel itself. I don’t have any objection to that idea, though I don’t find much support for it in the text.

What speaks to me is the way that Mary draws us all into the story when she asks the gardener where the body of Jesus is because “we” do not know where they have taken Him. I suppose that she could have meant herself and Peter and the Disciple whom Jesus loved, all who had so far looked into the tomb. Some suggest that the “we” is an oblique reference to the group of women who visited the tomb. No matter who, though, Mary speaks for the collective, for them, for all of us. Jesus’ absence from the tomb makes no sense, and we are mired in our despair, in our own tombs.

And Jesus speaks her name. My name. Your name. And calls us out into the daylight with Him.

Last year, Year A, I wrote at the end of this section on John 20, “Next year, or some year after that, I’ll probably write something a little more “scholarly” about John’s Resurrection Narrative. But not this year.”

Because all of the readings for this Easter are the same as last year’s, I didn’t have to do more than copy and paste the comments on the first three lessons, so I figured this was a good year to dig a little deeper into this text.

And I'm glad I did, because now one of the phrases in this story makes much better sense than it has to me for years. The question I've always had was, "What does Jesus' not having ascended yet have to do with Mary not clinging to Him?" And if the not-yet-accomplished ascension is the reason, why does He then go on to tell Thomas to put his hand in His side, to touch Him?

It's actually quite simple. It's a mistranslation. The Greek word translated as "for" in the sentence (*gar*) is usually translated that way, "because" or "for." But it can also be translated with an anticipatory sense, "since." If we translate it "since," it makes much better sense, but we need to punctuate it differently. (Keeping in mind that there is almost no punctuation in koine Greek.)

"She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me. Since I have not yet ascended to the Father, go instead to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

This requires that I also translate the particle *de* as "instead" rather than "but." The word *de* is a particle that marks contrast, and we need to make sense of its presence in the sentence, "instead" does that without requiring us to say that in this instance Jesus says that His impending ascension is the *reason* He cannot be touched, but rather it is the *reason* Mary must do something other than cling to Him.

Before I move on to the reading from Mark, I would like to make one other point. There are still too many Christians who maintain that women have no place in the pastorate, or preaching. But Jesus seems to think otherwise. He commissions Mary as the first evangelist. He *sends* her to the other disciples, making her the first "apostle." It really is a shame that it took most of the church nearly 2000 years to come into agreement with Scripture. It is beyond comprehension that there are still Christians who would like to go back to the way things were.

Or

"....and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Those were the last words of Mark's Gospel before some later editor decided that it needed some resurrection appearances and added verses 9-20. The manuscript evidence is undeniable. Mark ended his Gospel with the women saying nothing to anyone for they were terrified.

Contrast this reaction to the proclamation of the young man (I'll come back to him in a moment) with the reaction to the Baptist's proclamation in chapter one. "And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him..." Everyone wanted to hear John's proclamation of a Davidic Warrior King. No one wanted to hear (or tell) of a Messiah whose salvation is to be found in His death. Such a truth was too much to take.

This contrast is intentional on Mark's part. He presents this difference as starkly as possible, confronting the hearer with the same choice, the same question. "Will you follow Him? Proclaim Him? Without seeing Him?" Of course there were witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, but the people Mark wrote for weren't among them. (I believe these were people being prepared for Baptism.) They would make a commitment to Jesus based only on the proclamation of someone else, not the evidence their own eyes.

This young man (*ho neaniskos*) has a story arc in Mark's Gospel that mirrors perfectly the career of John the Baptist. In Mark's large chiasm, the story begins with John's proclamation and ends with the young man's. John's leaves the narrative with his death, and if we look at the corresponding point in the second half of Mark's Gospel we find the story of the rich young man who goes away sorrowful. That story begins the young man's story. In a version of Mark we no longer have, but to which Clement of Alexandria refers in a letter discovered by Morton Smith, the nameless young man is raised from the dead, then comes to Jesus for baptism, and is also present in the Garden of Gethsemane (the young man in the white robe from last Sunday).

While this character is never named, his resemblance to Lazarus is notable. But more than that, I think that he represents the ideal follower of Jesus. He begins like any of us, unable to give up our creature comforts to follow Jesus. He concludes his journey by proclaiming the Risen Lord and pointing the disciples to Galilee.

If that story arc won't preach, I don't know what will.