

EASTER1.C1
Quotes from M. Craig Barnes in
Christian Century April 6, 2004

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD
April 8, 2007

Acts 10:34-43
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
Luke 24:1-12

Luke 24:1-12

¹But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Early on Easter morning some women from Galilee went to the tomb where they had left Jesus. They might have been awake all night; grieving people often are. It is somehow easier to grieve at the grave and that's where they were going. *This* is how Easter starts. It does not begin with everyone jumping to his feet and singing the *Hallelujah Chorus*, but with some friends bring spices to the tomb to keep Jesus' dead body from smelling bad. It isn't a pretty image. We don't like to think about death.

A generation or so ago there were a lot of things people didn't talk about. Well brought up people avoided certain subjects because they were well brought up people. I would give a list of those subjects they didn't talk about back then, but we have a lot of visitors this morning and I am easily embarrassed. We talk about all of them now. However, as long as the list of restricted subjects might have been in that bygone era, people did not mind talking about death.

That's all changed. Now people talk about a lot of things that never would have passed conversational muster in my grandparents' day. Back then, even knowing the definition of some current topics of conversation would have been considered a personality disorder. Now, however, a well-informed opinion on a variety of startling subjects is part of responsible citizenship. But not death – you need to avoid that one in modern times. If you want to bring a dinner party to a grinding halt, just try to get a good conversation going on death and dying. You start talking about death and the other guests will start talking about their babysitter's curfew.

There have been times when death was a part of the conversation and a part of life. People got old and sick and died at home surrounded by their families with the neighbors coming in to help with meals and speak a comforting word. Earlier generations knew better than to believe that if they wore their seatbelts, and avoided smoking and ate a high-protein diet, they could avoid death.

In contemporary society we have found ways to remove death from our attention – at least until it comes.

The resurrection is hard to appreciate in a society that has isolated itself from death.

Death is a major character in the biblical story. People are always dying in Holy Scripture and those scriptures are direct. When Jesus prepares to raise Lazarus, the dead man's sister objects, "Lord, there will be an odor!" She knew about death.

Last month, the Lutheran World Federation released its annual surprise. It's a surprise for those who still think of Lutheranism as a Germanic and Scandinavian denomination that holds sway among people with blue eyes and pale skin. The report, as it does year after year, chronicled the continuing decline of numbers in Europe and the lack of growth in North America. Yet, Lutheranism is on the rise world-wide. Where? Our brothers and sisters in Africa are more than making up for our losses. Proclaiming the good news, baptizing, growing. I wonder if it is a coincidence that Christian numbers are growing in societies that cannot afford to ignore death as we do in contemporary America. In places where AIDS is wiping out thousands, and ethnic wars are raging, and areas of starvation – there doesn't seem to be any apathy toward religion. I wonder what would happen with our ministry here in this culture if we re-acquainted ourselves with the fact that death is closer than we acknowledge. The children on the other side of the world who are huddled in a village that is surrounded by land mines are no more terminal than the children we drove to soccer games yesterday. Their parents just understand it better.

That understanding is essential. Anyone who has been reminded of his mortality – through disease or accident – will tell you that it has changed the way they think of life. The knowledge of death focuses priorities, strengthens the relationships that mean the most. The knowledge of death prepares us for the resurrection.

Perhaps the best news we can give each other on this Easter morning is that everything we have is temporary: careers, possessions, relationships, and our lives. You can try to hang on to everything for a while, but what a silly way to live. Either you will be worried every day about losing what you have or you will pretend you won't die. (According to Jesus' disciples *that* is an idle tale.)

The disciples knew they couldn't keep the Jesus they had back in Galilee. He was dead. They knew death. Back in Galilee the disciples and the women who followed Jesus had held a lot of hope for what that Jesus could do. Those hopes died on Good Friday. There comes a time in every disciple's life when he discovers that his hopes for what Jesus will do have died on the cross.

Easter will not prevent those losses – but that's the *good* news. Easter is not a successful attempt to hang on to that we have. The resurrection is not the next thing in our development. It is the *new* thing; the *different* thing. And only God can give it.

Look at the Gospel reading this morning. It's about what is *different*. Luke has described the events of Good Friday and ended with Joseph of Arimathea wrapping Jesus' dead body and placing it in a tomb. There was a man who knew death. He had a spare tomb handy just in case. After a long, detailed description of death, written for the benefit of people who knew death, Luke prepares to tell about the Easter miracle. He begins with the word "but" – the first word in our gospel reading this morning. "But", "however", "nevertheless" – we are changing direction here. Something new is being introduced. There is a sacred intrusion into this death those people knew so well. "*But* on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body." The two men who were there said, "He is not here, *but* has risen."

We need to be acquainted with death if we are going to understand how violently it is being interrupted in this story.

To say that "Jesus is risen from the dead" is not to say he has returned to his earthly life. His earthly life was gone; it was dead. To say, "Jesus is risen from the dead" is to say that God has reached into the tomb and changed things. Just as he reaches into the lives we live everyday. He lifted Jesus to a new life and promises the same resurrection to us.

In order to receive a new life, we have to stop clinging to the old one. We have to stop looking for the living among the dead. The life of: the next career move, and obsessing about the kids, and the latest diet, and the argument that you insist proves you are right. It's all going to die anyway. Go to the empty tomb. There is a promise there for a new life that will not die.

Let's remind ourselves about death. There are a lot of things in this life and in the world that need to die. In their place we can devote ourselves to things that are eternal. We can cherish God and love our families. We can worship deeply. We can give generously. We can let God control the world (because we're really not that good at controlling it, anyway).

The new life God offers is not a continuation of our old life – the life we made ourselves. It is not a strengthening of the decisions we have already made. It is new and it is from God. God's resurrection is for people who have given up the old life we couldn't have kept anyway.

Take a moment to meet death. Think about it. Get acquainted. Find out how it acts. Death is a prerequisite for resurrection. The new life that God offers is the hope of our faith and all the joy of eternity.