

De-mystifying Jesus

Sermon for April 16, 2006 by the Reverend Lone Jensen

When I was very little and visited my grandmother's apartment it was a bit like going on a pilgrimage. My mother and I would take the noisy clanging tram for one full hour through the streets of Copenhagen and then we would walk up the shiny wooden stairs to the fourth floor, tenderly carrying our sacred offerings of pastries and fancy whipped cream cakes. From "the right" baker mind you! Once inside, I knew just where the hidden treasures were, dark ebony elephants, tiny wooden shoes, china and other treasures from around the world, gifts from my seafaring grandfather who died many decades before I was born. There were books everywhere, of the kind no longer found in any stores, and among them was a big illustrated Bible. On the front was a picture of a large stone tomb, its door gaping open, with massive stone columns on either side. Women wrapped in voluminous folds of cloth knelt there, with their adoring faces raised to the sky, and a very Greek god like angel stepped out of the black hole. The whole tableaux was framed in white Easter lilies and bound in gilded leather. For a small child, who still believed in magic, it was a powerful and frightening picture. The tomb appeared so dark and massive and the figures seemed so remote, and unreal, so that even the lilies seemed to be already dead and wilted. That picture was my first encounter with the story of resurrection and the Easter mystery. It was fearful and had little joy in it. Even though I was told it was happy event. I understood the

resurrection of nature, the strength of the snowdrop flowers that stuck their necks out through the cold snow. My heart sang with the crocuses, daffodils and the great greening miracle of budding trees. But a pale Greek god emerging from a stone cold tomb and passive women kneeling, so unlike my grandmother or mother, who were both strong and stubborn, natural forces of nature really, well, my ten year old soul could not embrace this cold miracle even if it did have a gentle, loving Jesus in it.

And I still can't. Not in the way it is often told anyhow.

I am, at best. a Jesus follower, a very imperfect one at that, and not a Christian. I can feel horror at the crucifixion and sorrow at the death of a good and innocent man. But it still seems to me, as if we humans, over the centuries have taken

the strong voice of Jesus, and replaced it with a more acceptable myth. There is nothing new about a dying God who comes back to life. There were an abundance of such gods everywhere at the time of Jesus. As Stephen Mitchell writes in his book: *What Jesus really did and said*.

Jesus was born and raised a Jew. He thought of himself as

a Jewish teacher. All his direct disciples were Jews. He felt that his job was to teach Jews about God and about the right way to live (though his teachings truly are for all people, Jews and Gentiles alike). He remained a Jew

throughout his short life. He didn't intend to begin a new religion. He wouldn't even have known what the word Christian means.(Christian is a word that appeared after his death to describe people who believed some things that he himself never believed.)

Nor would he have recognized the name Jesus Christ.

His name was Yeshua or Yeshu,, which is Joshua in English and Jesus in Greek. He didn't have a last name. No one did in those days. Men were called So-and-so son of So-and-so, or So-and-so from Such-and-such a place.

Anyway, Christ isn't a name; it's a title. It's the Greek Word for mashiakh, which is a Hebrew word that means "The Anointed One."

Mitchell has a good point. The miracle is perhaps that any of Jesus' teachings have survived centuries of theologians and church fathers, many of whom did their very best to put his living gospel away, safely hidden in golden shrines and behind glass, untouchable, immovable, irrelevant and like dried flowers, faded ghosts devoid of life and beauty. Jesus walked a dusty road, got hot, was thirsty, ate drank, grew weary, was fearful, joked, told good stories and somehow brought together those who otherwise would have been sworn enemies. Like the tax collector Mathew who collaborated with the Romans and freedom fighters like, some scholars believe Judas Iscariot was. Why? Because Iscariots, according to them, means small knives and there were at the time a group of such assassins who would enter crowds to

kill Romans and Jews who collaborated with them and then disappear. Let me right now say that I will soon preach about the new gospel of Judas that is in the news but that it to my mind changes little about Jesus. Early Christianity, before it became a state religion, was a marvelous bubbling cauldron of ideas and beliefs. In addition to the four accepted canonical gospels you can find many others, most only surviving in fragments. There are for example the gospels of Mary Magdalene and Thomas, of doubting Thomas fame, and now we can add the gospel of Judas. This gospel was also written 300 years after Jesus' death. The premise is that Judas did what Jesus wanted, which only makes sense if you believe in both the resurrection and in the atonement. Otherwise Jesus would be a man with a death wish. I doubt it very much, though I am sure he saw it coming, as the Romans offered a cruel and painful death to anyone who threatened the empirical powers. More than 10.000 people were crucified in the century Jesus lived.

But let us return to the Easter mystery. The horror of Jesus' death, his very public and humiliating death must have thrown his followers into deep despair. There is always a time of despair and deep shock, when we lose someone we love so suddenly. The women though had something they could do, so they went to the tomb to wash and anoint the body, as was customary. They were the first to find the tomb empty and bring that message back to the others. At first it is simply the realization that he is not there. Not in the grave. And that is

certainly true. The spirits, the memories of our lost loved ones are not to be found in their tomb, but in our hearts and souls. Whatever we have loved becomes intertwined with life and memory and becomes a part of us. Joyce Rupp writes: *Easter is about “tomb watchers.” It is about love that keeps vigil and waits and believes in life, no matter how dark and empty and cold the inner space feels. Easter is about hope that is willing to sit in the tomb while it trusts in transformation. Easter is about faithful companions who keep watch with us and cheer us on as we wait for our inner resurrection.*

That waiting, she writes about, can be nearly unbearably hard. If we have suffered a deep loss we need to reorder our very reality to fit it in. We may pray for patience and friends, who will be patient with us. Others may want us to lead us quickly out of that tomb space, but we can only experience the resurrection when our souls are ready for it. Jesus’ followers no doubt told each other the stories he had told them and somehow in the end they realized that his spirit was still among them. And so Jesus words survived to haunt us to this day.

We will never know just who he really was. Every generation makes him over in their own image. The resurrection though is not really part of his teachings. The Christ figure belongs to the Pauline church and the Roman world. As Mitchell puts it, *Jesus didn’t think that a male God had come down from the sky and impregnated a human female, who had then given birth to a hero, as in Greek and Roman*

mythology. What he meant by a son of God was someone who takes after God, just as a son takes after his father.

If you truly love God, and treat fellow human beings with respect and compassion then you are a son or daughter of God. “Blessed are the Peacemakers,” Jesus once said, “for they will be called sons of God.” “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those to mistreat you, so that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”

It is easier to believe in a risen God than to follow Jesus. And yet we celebrate resurrection every year. As our deeply embedded memory of a time when our very lives depended on that shoot of life giving green springing fresh from the stony ground.

Kathleen Norris dares to answer Jesus’ question: *Who do you say that I am?”*

Morning and evening, womb before dawn

Nova of blossom, star in the apple,

Word on the wind.

Long thorn of black locust, ironwood bark as warm as skin

The infant hands unfolding, light that forms the eye

The messenger, the one, whatever makes us sing,

Emergence, return,

the end of the spectrum,

Beginning of light... Light.

She writes: If as the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen believed, Christ was to be found in the creation, then that was where I needed to look. To stars - both, in the heavens and in the apple. Just look: stars are in both places. An infant's hand, too, resembles a star, or a starfish. And if you touch a tree with your own hands on a sunny day, the bark is remarkably warm. It's as if you're touching another person. I find it inspiring that these days, physicists themselves often sound like mystics. One, whose name I cannot recall, once wrote that every atom in the human body was once inside a star. Scientists also tell us that at the end of time, long after our sun has burnt out, and the vastness of the universe is collapsing on itself, all that we now know and see, all forms of energy, will exist as light. So in this poem, at least, I am a believer.

If Christ is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega then I have answered his question: Christ is light.

But this poem is also about the mysterious inspiration that can come to us, even in hard and unlikely circumstances, the "whatever" that makes us feel like singing, even when our world is crashing around us. It's about an ordinary yet miraculous occurrence: what had seemed like a cruel ending has turned into the beginning of something better than we could have imagined, and we know we will go on. So another answer to "Who do you say that I am?" might be: light and hope.

With this quote we have come full circle. In my

grandmother's darkened apartment, sitting by her picture window where the rare visitor, the sun, would now and the shine in, we partook in an earthly communion of dark coffee, pastries and cream cakes. And though I could not have put it into words at the time I took in the great mystery.

Love in the end is all that matters, the one sure thing that will carry us out of the tomb and save us from our own despair and the illusions of being separated from one another. And from God, who to me is and was in the sunlight, in the touch of her well-worn hands, in the beauty of the spring flowers and in the long journey it took to us to come into her presence.

Do not look far away or to long dead gods for resurrection. Look instead here and now among us, in the companionship of friends, look to this beloved community, search in your own heart, rejoice in the abundant beauty of yellow flowering trees singing along the ordinary roads we travel every day, find it in a baby's face, hear it in the laughter and feel it in the tears we share!

Joyce Rupp writes: *It is my hope for you this Easter season that you will trust the resurrection of your spirit, believe that joy and new life will come for you, even though it may not be there for you now. If you are one of the fortunate ones whose soul sings with happy alleluias this Easter, may you turn often*

to those who are still awaiting their greening and, walk hopefully with them.

Every year the dull and dead in us meets our Easter challenge: to be open to the unexpected, to believe beyond our security, to welcome God in every form, and trust in our own greening

