

THE WHOLE THING

Texts on Easter Sunday

April 24, 2011

Jeremiah 31: 1-9; John 20: 1-18

Can a new thing be said about Easter? I don't think so. Were there a new thing to say—a new twist—whose twist? Whose gospel? Mine? And yet repeating old thoughts is just slogans, which are not worth saying twice, except for politicians. Are we then stuck? Throughout its ages, religion has very often gotten stuck in its old thoughts. Power has always been the sticking point. Jesus felt that. Why, the whole thing called “the tradition of the prophets” was voices refusing to prop up the old powers with the old thoughts. From the prophet, we can receive a clue to renew Easter. Not that we might say a new thing—but that we might hear anew.

First, a short review of Israel's history and a little geography. More than a century before Jeremiah wrote this poem, the northern half of his land (sometimes called Israel, sometimes Ephraim) was invaded by an empire to the east. The northern capital Samaria was overrun, its leaders and lawyers and priests exiled into strange lands. The venerable federation of tribes was destroyed. This very month, the United States marks 150 years since our north and south split violently apart. Although our schism opened and ended very differently from Israel's, a little imagination yields a sense for the sorrow and confusion that befell the remnant of that ancient people when their northern clans were scattered forever like gold dust on a desert wind. For more than a century thereafter, the south weighed the meaning of the northern disaster. Then, a new empire, Babylon, came up to wipe the southern tribe from history. The leaders were exiled a thousand miles from home, Jerusalem burned, the temple torn stone from stone. The promised land—the divine promise as well as the land, the whole thing—lay in ruins.

Now you can hear Jeremiah's song. “In the latter days, I will be God of all the families of Israel . . . I will build you, O virgin Israel. Again you will make merry, again plant vineyards in Samaria, again fill the hill country of Ephraim, calling all to go up to Zion to worship the LORD. I will bring them from the lands of the north and from the farthest parts of the earth.” Jeremiah's whole thing is a dream from the midst of disaster. If his song were, “I have a dream today that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood”—your own bones would sing it. “With weeping they shall come and with consolations and not stumble for I the Lord am father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn.” He had a dream that day.

A few generations after Jeremiah dreamed it, that remnant exiled in Babylon was sent back home. And from that time, they became the Jews. They changed the way they worshiped God. It took shape as Judaism. And though the tribes to the north were forever lost, Jews and Judaism never forgot—never forget—Jeremiah's song. "I the Lord will be the God of all the families of Israel." The spiritual genius of the Jews—we cannot explain it with a simple phrase—includes this edgeless trust that the word of God is practical and shall not return empty; that one day, the twelve shall be one once more. The whole thing will come together.

Five hundred years after these things, Jesus was a Jew. He studied the scriptures, he knew the prophets, he knew in his own heart the religious hope of his people. And he saw the unholy scar in the land, how the people of Samaria to the north were despised, and others in every direction. He proclaimed that God's reunion of all tribes was at hand. Although his disciples were many—all the gospels say so—he also held close just twelve. You see what he was saying—the twelve for the twelve tribes, a sign of the latter days come, a foretaste of Jeremiah's dream of the whole thing.

Then it broke. The religious powers hated Jesus' constant word that that grand temple and its lofty practices matter not at all for the gift of God, for the whole thing is already here for those who love. The Roman powers hated the constant insurrections among this indomitable people and preferred to eliminate potential threats. So they killed Jesus. The twelve scattered. Again. The whole thing fell apart.

Now, the collapse of a dream held by a few men is sad, even tragic, but it is not the whole thing, is it? No band can stand for the whole of humanity, it seems. The interests of any tribe are too small to meet the needs of all. We bridle like horses when a clan claims a special meaning above others'. How can a small thing stand for the whole thing?

And yet, when confronting the end of things, we meet a mystery. When that "delicate network of relationships by which an individual defines the meaning and significance of his person is ruptured," (Howard Thurman) a mystery of total significance descends like a spirit visiting. If we have divorced, and are even a little humane, we have been touched by the angel of death, who humbles us utterly with our frail word and the vanished place of the once-beloved. For we meant to offer the other the whole thing—and it turned out to be so much bigger on the inside than on the out. And then we let the whole thing fall apart. That dashed dream often changed history.

A church is like this, too. If there has been a break, a real hardness of heart in the people; if some have abused and been abused in the spaces

where Love was supposed to have bid all welcome—well, from the outside, these things look annoying, the people seem small, and the papers may cluck. But a church is so much bigger on the inside than on the out precisely because it was established to stand for the whole human family, the whole thing. If it broke, the whole thing broke. People scatter like disciples.

And if you are facing a death, whether in your own body or in one for whom you will offer the whole vigil, you know that here is an infinite opening on the inside, an irreducible gift, no matter how shrunk by guilts and sorrows, or propped by prizes and prestige. Thurman writes that because of

the essential solitariness of all living . . . death is often characterized as the long march, the silent journey . . . This privacy remains untouched because it is outside of any event . . . This means that life, measured in terms of events . . . affects only the surface part of the individual's living. But life in another sense goes on simultaneously and is unaffected by all the happenings . . .

How shall we put it? The whole thing is infinitely greater on the inside than on the outside. Thurman continues.

In this sense, death is something that comes *in* life but not *to* life. This is the meaning of the eternal in time. All live the eternal in time, but not all are aware of this aspect of their lives . . . Here is one of the central insistences of Jesus, that death is powerless over the life of a man who lives the eternal in time. The true meaning is not that man does not die just as the grass dies. When he realizes that at his very core, he is a part of life in a private, personal, intimate sense and that that privacy is never invaded, then he contemplates all change, however seemingly fundamental, as external to him.

You know these things already. These spirits have visited you. Sometimes while listening to an exquisite line of music, or paused with a perfect poem, or looking on your beloved, friend, or child from a little distance. Then you have felt the whole thing—the goodness of what was given, the impossibility of taking its measure, or paying down the debt you owe, or preventing the release. This spirit can have come even in the midst of evil and destruction, if you knew you were needed as a witness for the whole thing. For part of the mystery in our watching over the whole thing is that the sense for the all-in-all comes always through the small and the particular. The whole thing is only present to the touch, only to the heart. It cannot be deduced. It cannot be seen with the ordinary eye. It cannot be grasped.

All the resurrection stories tell it this way, that no one recognizes the Lord with the eye; that none can grasp him. Remember for Mary and the others that the long-dreamt dream of perfect union of the beloved community has been shattered in the events of the crucifixion. Events fragment the world and keep us from seeing the whole thing. Mary is pulled apart. She cannot even honor the body of the beloved Master, for they have taken him away. Now she turns and looks at Jesus, but sees a gardener. To see but not see Jesus, present, unbroken, whole—this is a figure for what Thurman called

“life measured [only] in terms of events, [life which] affects only the surface part of living.” But when she hears the voice—*Mary!*—she turns to him in full. *Rabbouni!* “The delicate network of relationship by which an individual defines the significance of her person” is made firm. The edgeless trust that the word of God is practical and does not return empty is made manifest. The whole thing comes together, all the way from Jeremiah. Soon the twelve will return. Then “I will bring them from the lands of the north and from the farthest parts of the earth.” All the way from Abraham, God’s first promise returns full: “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Mary moves toward him to touch him, to hold him. The risen one stops her. The whole thing cannot be grasped; but it can be heard, felt, sung—in the experience of being raised from fragmentary things to seeing the whole thing with the eye of the Spirit. The first Christians were Jews, many of whom began to feel part of the promises of God to draw all the families of the earth into the whole thing. Their movement was so little on the outside; so great within.

Now, for almost two thousand years, Christians have mostly sought to draw others into their thing. Now we begin to see that the whole thing is greater than the church; that the table is set not for Christians and Jews only, but for all. And yet, we Christians will affirm—it is our Resurrection song—that through Jesus, we came to see the whole thing. Through this particular life, and this awful death, and this unutterably great affirmation of life without but God—through this small, we began to see all in all.

Once The Riverside Church proudly proclaimed itself international, interracial, interdenominational. But the times of God press us on into a new epoch. For Christians, the work must become joyfully, affirmatively inter-religious, inter-class, inter-world. Now we pray, bring us from the lands of the north, and gather them from the farthest parts of the earth in the place you will show us. Come too the blind and the lame, and those who wait for the future and those who are laboring even now to give it birth—all together; a great company, they shall return here. This is why we go to the church today. To take part in the whole thing. He is risen!

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