

THE GOOD BIG THING

Text on Easter Sunday

April 4, 2010

Luke 24: 1-35?

Have you ever been inside something that's bigger inside than it is on the outside? You have. Your family, for starters. Unless you're a Kennedy or a Bush, no family is very big on the outside. Even if yours is what we call a big family, it's not big like a corporation or a nation. Even if some of our families can be traced back for generations, the history is not big, viewed from the outside.

But from where you stand, inside your family. . . where is the edge of the family? Where does care or hope or troubling stop at a wall? It does not. Yes, when relationships break down like long-distance runners with no water, the outside wall of care, and the door leading out, sometimes is right there. But that unhappy fact only underlines the idea. From the inside, each family has infinite dimensions. The same is so of each human, of course. Though from the outside we are easily reduced to objects and statistics (did you fill out your census form?) and though we will come one day to our last day when life is very short seen from the outside, still, now and always, from the inside, a voice is calling, an eye is seeing, a mind is opening eternally.

Easter is like this. Its empty tomb is like this. I don't know what it was on the outside, how to explain it, or explain it away, so I don't try to stoop and peer into the tomb to figure it out. You know, if a video camera could have caught the story for the news, so that seeing Resurrection was simply a record, having nothing to do with what's inside the seer, then Resurrection would just be a neat trick, a divine power trip. If Easter could be watched by careless machines or careless men, then it could be Jack or Jill instead of Jesus, and the trick would be just as good. Then it *would* be bigger on the outside than on the inside. Then Resurrection would be like everything else that's big and strong in the world. And temporary.

But Easter is something else altogether from mere facts. Easter doesn't record. It only comes on live. Why look for the living among the dead? You will find absolutely nothing from searching that tomb or the scriptures or any other deposit for aids in figuring out whether the Resurrection story is, as they say, "to be believed." Don't try to believe it, like an eight-year old trying to hang on in spite of new data about Santa. Leave "believe." Trust.

When I was in seminary, the professor of a course called "Religion and the Arts" invited film director Robert Benton to come and screen and discuss with us his recent Oscar-winning film, *Places in the Heart*. The film concludes with a scene from a Sunday morning worship underway. We hear the last stanza of *Blessed Assurance*. The sacrament of Holy Communion is being served. And a mystery unfolds.

When the lights went up in the classroom, our professor exclaimed to Benton, "How did you come to an interpretation of Holy Communion which the Church has been searching for for six hundred years?" I don't recall Benton's answer, but the question is more important. What are we doing here with this story of the empty tomb and risen Lord and the broken bread? Do you sense, like my professor, that since the Western churches shattered into fragments hundreds of years ago, a lot of us don't have a real feeling for this sacrament, not in the way we have real feeling for, say, our favorite music, or for our family or for our work? What did Benton's art touch that drew forth such feeling? Do you remember?

It is a Sunday afternoon. In the first ten minutes of the film, five of the ten commandments are broken, among them adultery and murder. A stray shot fired by a drunken teenager kills the sheriff. A gleeful, angry mob of men lynch that boy. The story turns around the determination of the sheriff's widow to hold her family together without a husband. A black man and a blind man help her; they are abused and beaten; one is driven from the town. More of the story there isn't space to tell, but let it be

said that as with any story well-told, you come up feeling something of the infinite dimension of care and need and hope inside these people and this family as a spring and summer pass.

Now at the end of the film, it is again a Sunday. Closeup on a row of worshipers, very close. You see half of a neighbor on either side of each person as the camera slowly pans with the communion tray. Each worshiper serves the one next, saying something gently: “The Blood of Christ.” Soon we are seeing the children there with their mother. Good. The blind man. Hmm; he said he didn’t believe in all this. Then, other townspeople, some we haven’t liked; that’s church. Now, here are the married couple, even though his adultery is exposed; grace! And who is this? Isn’t it Moze, whom they beat and drove from town? You wonder how he got back—or why? The camera moves along more faces we know from town. What? Here is the dead boy they dragged behind a truck for hours—how is . . .? And he is receiving the cup, the blood of Christ, from one of his tormentors? And turning now to serve the tall white man, the sheriff, killed by the bullet from the drunk boy’s hand who is saying “Thanks be to God”? And the choir is singing “. . . praising my Savior all the day long”? Fade. Here the film ends.

The church—this church—is infinitely greater on the inside than on the outside. From the outside: an old tradition, an odd story; from the outside, just cars blocking the bike lane. On the inside, you understand that if the church—this church—is not about Easter, it is not about anything lasting. For Easter is only visible from the inside. It doesn’t record; it only comes on live. What does it mean for a church to be about Easter?

It’s simple to define it, not so easy to let it to flow. In the Easter church, the people get it—no, not all of them, but enough of them—that they have been saved from something, and not by their own hard work. Saved from what? From blindness, basically. From not seeing what is right before them, who it is that is there. The risen Lord in the gospel stories, when their eyes are opened at last and they see. That is Easter church. In the film story, Easter church is a parable of reconciliation, of seeing the other as a human, no matter what he has done. Here, what is it?

First Church is an Easter church, big on the inside, because you bear in your faces the signs of reconciliations which our whole nation is unhappily struggling after. The work is not done, of course, but we have begun to see what work we have been given. Alas, scales are still on the eyes of so many of our citizens. We read this week that home-grown militias, some of them terrorists, have nearly tripled in number since Obama was elected. If we have been saved from that blindness, we see it was not our own doing. That is an Easter church.

The apostle Paul says, *You, O church, are the body of Christ*. You. So it is you who will be lifted up, more and more. Are you ready? Or is some angry lumber stuck in your eye, keeping you from seeing the fellowship you have with someone you feel hurt by? The funny thing about an Easter church is it can’t stay an Easter church for long. Complacency and pride and “we always did it this way” soon cast cataracts over once-Easter eyes. Therefore, into every church God’s future must come into view: some need, some person, some injustice we haven’t seen before now. Some possibility within yourself personally, some power you as one church have never yet leaned into. A new body for someone who was nobody. In an Easter church, the people—enough of them, anyway—see something in the way they’ve been that makes them squirm, for they know that the change is coming. And they’re an Easter church because they know where the strength comes for the journey. From inside the body of Christ.

This table is the sign of God’s good big thing here. Come to it, everyone, ready to serve your neighbor. Come singing.

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