

RECEIVING CHRIST

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
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APRIL 1, 2018/EASTER SUNDAY

Each year on Easter Sunday morning I read a short prayer from Brian McLaren. I've shared it before but I want to share it again today.

Dear Lord, I pray for all the pastors today
Who will feel enormous pressure to have their sermon
Match the greatness of the subject
and will surely feel they have failed.
(I pray even more for those who think they have succeeded.)

This is always a good prayer to begin my Easter sermon preparations. There are no human words that can fully do justice to the reality that we joyfully proclaim on this day.

This will be my seventh Easter sermon at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. This past week I did a quick survey of the previous six. I found what I thought were some decent words. I was even tempted to use one of them again. But I also found six sermons that, predictably and appropriately, failed to match the greatness of the subject.

I noticed another trend. I have tended to use Easter Sunday as an opportunity to address the "did it really happen" question. I have, to varying degrees at various times, imagined that I was speaking to skeptics needing to be convinced that Jesus really *was* raised from the dead, that Easter really *is* gloriously more than a nice metaphor for new possibilities in life and the arrival of spring (I have heard rumours that there are parts of the world where Easter and spring actually *do* go together ☺).

I think this is probably good and necessary, particularly in a context as skeptical as ours. Both outside and inside the church, I think many people come to Easter Sunday looking to be convinced (and convinced again and again).

This year, I thought I would take a bit of a different approach. Rather than “did it really happen?” I want us to consider the question, “*How* did it happen?”

How was the story of Jesus’ resurrection told, how did it make its way into the world, and what does this say about God and about us?

One of the things that I like about our church is that we try to involve as many people as possible in public worship. One of these ways is in reading Scripture.

I remember when my kids were younger, whenever I gave them a passage to read in worship, I would always do a kind of pre-scouting expedition to see if there were any awkward names that they would have to pronounce.

I still do this today when I ask people to read—even grown ups! It’s good to have advance warning if you’re going to encounter a pesky Melchizedek or Zerubbabel or Mephibosheth.

The stories that we tell in Scripture each week are full of names, many of them very strange ones.

Speaking of Scripture, I’ve heard a lot of it read publicly this week.

We had seven readings at our Maundy Thursday service here a few days ago. On Good Friday, Naomi and I attended a service at St. Augustine’s where we heard four more, including an extended reading of the Passion narrative from John’s gospel.

I’ve heard each of these passages many times.

This Holy Week, what stood out to me in all these familiar readings was the sheer volume of names, awkward or otherwise.

Perhaps it sounds strange to you that this would stand out.

These are the climactic moments of God's story, the moment when King Jesus is crowned in an utterly unexpected way, when human sin is judged, when God, in Christ, absorbs the worst that the world could inflict upon him, when Jesus lives out everything he has taught in his early ministry, and when God vindicates him by raising him from the dead.

With all of this theologically important stuff going on, why focus on the background characters?

But it was precisely the "background characters" that stood out to me this week.

On Maundy Thursday we heard a lot of names read out loud: Quirinius, governor of Syria, Emperor Augustus, Mary, Joseph, Levi, son of Alphaeus, unnamed woman that Jesus calls "daughter" after healing her long affliction, Judas Iscariot, Simon Peter, Pilate, Mary the wife of Clopas, Mary Magdalene, the Roman centurion, Joseph of Arimathea...

On Good Friday at St. Augustine's we walked through the passion narrative from John's gospel where we heard the names Pilate, Barabbas, Caesar, and then, as Jesus hangs dying on a cross, again, Mary wife of Clopas and Mary Magdalene.

Today, on Easter Sunday we encounter Mary Magdalene, again, visiting the tomb, Simon Peter and the "disciple that Jesus loved" (John's not-so-humble way of referring to himself).

The gospels insist on *naming* people at every stage of Jesus' journey to the cross and through the empty tomb.

These names anchor Jesus' story in real history, real places, with real people.

The Christian message is not primarily a philosophy or a collection of teachings or a set of timeless principles, although it includes these things. It is God entering actual places, encountering flesh and blood human beings with names and faces and stories, and offering salvation.

And our text from 1 Corinthians picks up the story as it proceeded out from the resurrection. A few decades after the events of that first Easter, Paul is reminding a fledgling church—and a pretty screwed up church, at that (read the first 14 chapters, if

you have any doubt of this)—of who they are, of the gospel that they had believed in and why it matters.

To do this, he goes back to the beginning. He walks them through the story: Christ died for your sins; he was buried, and then raised on the third day.

Then Paul starts doing the same thing the Gospels do: naming names, referring to people.

He appeared to Peter and the twelve...

(Paul doesn't mention the women, which kind of underlines just how problematic it was to have to rely on the testimony of women in that cultural context—and which makes it all the more remarkable that the gospel accounts unapologetically say that the first witnesses to the event that changed the world were women!)

After Peter and the Twelve, Paul reminds them that Jesus appeared to over five hundred brothers and sisters, most of whom are still alive. Then James, and last of all to Paul himself, on the road to Damascus.

Paul is reminding the church that he's not making this stuff up! There are people alive who saw, who heard, who touched, who remember.

He's saying, in a sense, *You know this! This is what you believed, and for good reasons.*

As I pondered all the names this Holy Week, and Paul's strategy in addressing a stubborn church, something pretty simple occurred to me.

God doesn't seem to do anything important in the world without involving and entrusting himself to human beings.

God did this when he came in human form in Jesus. And it eventually got him nailed to a cross in a collusion of religion and empire.

And the risen Christ does the same thing. He entrusts himself to human beings. He appears to real people with names. People who the early church in Corinth would have known and remembered. People you could go up to and say, "This really happened, right? You really saw him!"

It's worth remembering that God didn't have to do things this way.

I suppose Jesus could have emerged from the tomb in a blaze of light and the blast of a trumpet. He could have hovered over Jerusalem in an undisputable miraculous display (maybe like an oversized version of the statue of Christ the Redeemer that looks down on Rio de Janeiro, Brazil!).

He could have written his name in the clouds. He could have caused a meteor shower. He could have gone to the city centre of Jerusalem and preached the best sermon ever! He could have engineered any number of spectacular jaw-dropping displays that we would consider worthy of something like rising from the dead. He could have left no room for doubt.

Many of us might wish he had, in fact, done things this way.

But that wouldn't have been like Jesus. That wasn't how he operated in life and it isn't how he operates after his defeat of death.

Instead, he goes and meets with a handful of fearful disciples quivering behind locked doors and tells them not to be afraid. He goes for a walk on a road. He has breakfast with some friends on a beach. He interprets the scriptures and his fulfillment of them to a few people. He seeks out and forgives the one who betrayed him.

Even after something as big as resurrection, Jesus starts small.

He entrusts himself to frail, fallen, unreliable human beings. Human beings who get things wrong, who forget, who have faulty memories, who have vested interests. Human beings who struggle to implement the victory accomplished by Jesus' cross and empty tomb (as the church in Corinth, and every church since, has proved). Human beings who settle for much smaller stories than the true story of Easter, taming it by locating it in the realm of nice symbols and metaphors.

And, thanks be to God, human beings who also get it right from time to time. Human beings who faithfully receive and believe and pass down the story. Human beings who live lives of joyful worship and participation in the new life that has come in Christ and which will one day be finally implemented.

The risen Christ entrusts himself to us.

It seems, on the face of it, a poor strategy. It's not a very good way of controlling the message. There are way too many middlemen and middle women that could contaminate the message or leave important things out.

But this, too, is how God tends to operate. A God who upended human wisdom with the foolishness of the cross is precisely the kind of God who we might imagine might do something like entrust the most astonishing event the world has ever seen to people like us.

Maybe it's appropriate that this Easter Sunday falls on April Fool's Day.

In doing things this way, I think that God closes off certain possibilities for us. We are not allowed to encounter Jesus and the hope of Easter exclusively in our own private spiritual lives.

We have to read old stories with names that are hard to pronounce. We have to negotiate our faith in conversation with other people, from the ancient world, right down the present. We have to compare notes, ask questions like, "What did you see, what did you hear, what have you experienced? How do you understand this?"

We have to rely on people like Paul who penned some of the most beautiful words in all of Scripture and who also leaves out the women when he tells the resurrection story. Or people like John and his weird habit of referring to himself as "the disciple Jesus loved."

We have to shed the illusion that we are independent sovereign evaluators of evidence and exercise trust in the people through whom God comes to us.

We have to listen to Christian voices from across the millennia right down to the present. We don't always have to agree, but we do have to listen.

We have to come together as communities, to share our stories, to ask questions like, "This really happened, right?"; to hear stories of new life emerging in the land of death; to find Jesus' story validated in our attempts to live out his teaching.

There is virtually nothing that God does that does not involve us as human beings... and that does not involve us with one another.

This is how the reality of the empty tomb makes its way into the world, infiltrating death and darkness and proclaiming freedom and forgiveness, light and life.

We *should* leave worship on Easter Sunday talking about Jesus. We should leave with words like “He is risen” and “Alleluia!” on our lips.

We should probably also leave talking *about*, talking and listening *to* the human beings through whom we receive the risen Christ.

I want to end my sermon today by looking at the verses that come immediately after our reading from 1 Corinthians.

After Paul reminds the church in Corinth of the gospel that they have received, he goes on to address the claim that people made then and have made ever since—that resurrection from the dead was simply impossible:

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.

This is a fascinating approach.

Our modern temptation is to say, “I can’t believe that Jesus was raised from the dead because resurrection from the dead is impossible.”

We take what we think is possible and apply it to how we evaluate the story of Jesus.

Paul takes what happened to Jesus and uses it to redefine what is possible for us and for all of creation.

Paul takes a known fact—remember, Paul was probably writing 1 Corinthians a couple of decades after Jesus’ death and resurrection—and says, in effect, “But of course resurrection is possible... don’t you *remember what happened?! What we told you? What people that you know saw and heard and touched?*”

Don't you remember what we received from those who were there?

On this Easter Sunday, 2108, my prayer is that we would *receive* Christ. Just like Paul, just like Mary Magdalene and Simon Peter and James and untold millions of people ever since.

And that what we receive, we would pass on for others to receive. That Jesus died for you and me and every other human being. That he was buried. That, against all odds, on the third day he was raised to glorious life.

That anything is possible because of what happened to Jesus.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

