

The Power That Prevails

Mark 16:1-8; John 20:1-10

Easter Sunday

24th April 2011

Political correctness would not allow me to tell the following story the way it was told to me recently – by one of my elders, no less! Even so, I may be walking on thin ice even telling it this way.

Three young hillbillies, Dumb, Dumber and Dumbest, die in a tragic accident and arrive at the Pearly Gates on Easter Sunday. St. Peter tells them that they can enter if they can answer one simple question, “What is Easter?”

Dumb replies, “Oh, that’s easy! It’s the holiday in November when everyone gets together, eats turkey, and is thankful...”

“Wrong!” replies St. Peter, and proceeds to ask Dumber the same question, “What is Easter?”

Dumber replies, “Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus.”

St. Peter looks at Dumber, shakes his head in disgust, tells him he’s wrong, and then peers over his glasses at Dumbest and asks, “Can you tell me what Easter is?”

Dumbest smiles confidently and looks St. Peter in the eyes, “No problem. I know what Easter is.”

“Oh really?” says St. Peter, incredulously.

“Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and Jesus was later deceived and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took him to a place called Calvary, made to wear a crown of thorns, and was hung on a cross with nails through his hands. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder.”

St. Peter smiles broadly with delight. “That’s my boy!” he says as he begins to open the gates for him to enter.

But Dumbest continues, “Then every year on Easter Sunday the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out... and, if he sees his shadow, there will be six more weeks of winter.”

Ah, he was nearly there! He got 99% of it correct. But, at the end, he just couldn’t keep it right. He just couldn’t “stay on message”, so to speak.

That’s a big thing in today’s world, isn’t it? Staying on message. People in the advertising world, for instance, are very aware of that. You have got to keep your story straight. You have got to be constantly consistent. No varying to the left or the right. You have got to keep making your central point. You have got to “stay on message”.

We also, of course, that during the current election campaign, our politicians are very sensitive to this fact. No doubt, their backroom campaign staff will be reminding them untiringly how important it is to stay “on message” and not allow their opponents or the media to tempt them into getting

off-topic or being distracted and going off at tangents.

To this end, the Conservatives keep banging out the same few themes over and over again – the need for their party to have a majority, the importance of lower taxes, as well as the necessity of eliminating the deficit. The Liberals, for their part, keep harping on about the dangers of a Conservative majority as well as promising to cut corporate taxes and advocating quality care for the young and the elderly. And the NDP, for their part, return again and again to their arguments about improving health care, rewarding job creators and making life for ordinary Canadians more affordable.

Yes, all our political leaders are trying their hardest these days in the run-up to May 2nd to “stay on message”, to ensure that everyone in the party is speaking with the same voice and so prevent any inconsistencies, discrepancies or contradictions weakening their campaign and undermining their platform.

Talking about “staying on message”, that’s one thing that the Gospel writers did not do when they were telling the story of the Resurrection. They were so inconsistent, unable to agree with each other and get their facts straight.

When you read the Resurrection narratives with a critical eye, you soon become aware that there are a great many discrepancies and divergences between the different accounts of the story. So much so that it makes you wonder how the story has managed to endure and influence the lives of so many people for hundreds and hundreds of years.

Take, for instance, the matter of which women actually went to the Tomb on that first Easter morning. The Gospel writers all agree that Mary Magdalene was there. But they are divided over who – if anyone – was with her. John tells us Mary Magdalene was alone. Mark says it was Mary Magdalene accompanied by Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. Matthew says it was Mary Magdalene along with “the other Mary”. Luke, meanwhile, says it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, as well as other unidentified women.¹

On top of this, Mark in his Gospel says that the sun had risen at the time when they first went to the tomb while John says that it was still dark. Matthew says that an angel came and rolled the stone away but Luke says there were two men in dazzling clothes while John says there were two angels dressed in white. Luke says that Peter went alone to the tomb whereas John’s Gospel says it was both Peter and John together while Matthew and Mark, for their part, don’t mention any of the men going to the tomb. In Mark’s account, the reaction by Jesus’ followers to his resurrection is fear and distress but in the other gospels the empty tomb is greeted with amazement and joy.²

Different accounts. Different details. Different

sequences. But despite the disparities in the four stories of that Easter morning, the amazing thing is the central message is absolutely the same: Something great and wonderful, something absolutely mind-blowing happened that day. Somehow Jesus, who was dead, had been brought back to life.

Now, moving forward 2,000 years, you would think that, with the benefit of centuries of reflection and research, contemporary Christians would be more in agreement on matters of the Resurrection than the early Gospel writers. Not so! There are still very significant differences. Some Christians believe the Resurrection was a literal, historical event, while others hold it to have been a spiritual or visionary experience, while yet others claim it was simply symbolic in nature.

But, again, taking such divergences into account, the amazing thing is that most Christians have been able to stay on message with regard to their common, central Easter conviction: that the risen Christ is alive today in 2011 and, despite appearances to the contrary, still has the power to bring radical change to many individuals and communities around the world, sowing life where there is death, and hope where there is despair.

And this power is so great, Christians believe, there is no obstacle that the risen Christ cannot overcome. There is no heart that is so closed he cannot gain entrance.

Writer Harold McKeithen tells of a New Orleans cemetery where there is a burial vault held securely shut by strong, steel clasps, bearing the inscription, "This burial place must never be opened. For here lies the body of a woman who believed in no resurrection." And, he says, it remained very secure, shut up tight, impervious to air or water. But, "sometime in the past a seed of some sort had got into a joint between the stones of the vault and established roots. It began to grow and, over the years, became a tree which wrenched the steel clasps apart, steadily transforming a place of death into a place of life."³ The resurrection happened in a place where it was not supposed to happen showing how, over and over again, the Resurrection makes the impossible become possible.

Christians may have different views of the Resurrection but they are still able to stay on message, declaring again and again that the risen Christ has an indomitable power that will ultimately prevail. No matter what the obstacles, good will triumph over evil, grace will triumph over sin, and love will be victorious over hate.⁴

And, even more. Despite differing opinions about Easter, Christians down through the centuries have constantly stayed on message, not just about the power of the Resurrection but how that power is expressed and communicated. They have relentlessly proclaimed the central belief that the dynamic power of Christ's resurrection will prevail through those who are his followers in the world today and who work to achieve his purposes. God doesn't bring about his miracles in thin air or a vacuum but through human channels, through those who carry in their hearts a belief in Christ and in his rising again from the dead. Through

them he lives on. Through them his work is continued and completed.

The great opera composer Puccini - who wrote such masterpieces as *Madame Butterfly*, *La Boheme* and *Tosca* - was stricken with cancer in 1922. But he decided he wanted to write one more opera and it would be entitled *Turandot*. "Suppose you die before it's finished?" asked a friend pessimistically. "Well, then, one of my disciples will finish it," replied the composer. Two years later, Puccini died without being able to complete his great opera. However, it was decided to go ahead and present what he had done. The premier took place at La Scala in Milan and the performance continued to the point where Puccini's work abruptly ended. The conductor, Toscanini, then lowered his baton and said sadly to the audience, "Thus far the master wrote ... and he died." Then, a smile came over his face. He picked up his baton and began to conduct while shouting to the audience, "But the Master lives on because his disciples finished his music!"⁵

As Christian disciples, we likewise are called to finish our Master's music. And to do it in many different ways. By bringing hope to a troubled friend ... by striking a blow for justice where disadvantaged people are mistreated ... by seeing constructive possibilities in life rather than dragging others down by chronic pessimism and criticism ... by practising forgiveness rather than revenge ... by planting the seeds of Christ's love in a child's heart. And as we do such things, our Master, the Risen Christ, lives on.

Christians around the world may have many differing beliefs about the Resurrection. But we are united in believing that the power of the Risen Christ is at work in the world and that it will prevail through those who love him and serve him. Yes, the Master lives on. But God needs to work through you and me - and many others - to make it all happen.

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¹ John 20:1; Mark 16:1; Matthew 28:1; Luke 24:10

² Mark 16:2; Luke 20:1; Matthew 28:2; Luke 24:4; John 20:12; Luke 24:12; John 20:3; Mark 16:8; Matthew 28:8; Luke 24:12; John 20:20

³ J. Harold McKeithen, "Music To Move Stones", www.sermonmall.com, April 2003

⁴ *Ibid*, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol III, Number 5, page 26.

⁵ *Ibid*