

The Sunday of the Resurrection
April 16, 2006
St Paul's Cathedral, Burlington, Vermont

*"Do not hold on to me... But go..." [She] went... "I have seen the Lord."*¹

In her memoir, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*, Karen Armstrong who had the courage to write *The History of God*, recounts an event when she was an 18-year-old postulant for religious life, a nun-in-training, a vocation she later abandoned.

I had heard a warning bell. We were doing a...course in apologetics, which explained the rational grounds for faith. I was set an essay: "Assess the historical evidence for the Resurrection." I had read the requisite textbooks, could see what was required, and duly produced a discussion of the events of the first Easter Sunday that made Jesus' rising from the tomb as uncontroversial and unproblematic historically as the Battle of Waterloo. This was nonsense, of course, but that did not seem to matter...

"Yes, Sister, very nice." Mother Greta...smiled at me as she handed back my essay.

"But Mother," I suddenly found myself saying, "it isn't true, is it?"

Mother Greta sighed, pushing her hand under her tightly fitting cap and rubbing her forehead as if to erase unwelcomed thoughts. "No, Sister," she said wearily, "it isn't true. But please don't tell the others."

How many of us have come here today with that very same question - "it isn't true, is it?" Others, we feel, think we lack faith, so we secretly house doubts about ourselves and feel inadequate in the face of it all. Questions, we assume, signify our failure to believe, questions we don't dare voice out loud. "Doubts," we call them. But questions are what indicate our willingness to go deeply into what it means to be alive as a human being. The spiritual journey is always about the questions. The questions are the signposts on the way. The questions catapult the seeker on to the very heart of God.

Modern Western types see these central stories not as "parabolic narratives" - which they clearly are - but pages straight out of *The New York Times*. We should be able, so we fantasize, to picture what the video tape of the empty tomb really looked like. We should know the hard questions the BBC correspondent asked the two angels. We should be able to see the CNN reporter imbedded with the Roman garrison telling us without hesitation what Mary Magdalene, Peter, or the Beloved Disciple were experiencing. We should then know, feel, and believe them, too. No questions. No doubts. Immediacy. Bliss. Knowing. Faith. Loved. But these aren't factual accounts; instead, they express what the risen Christ meant to the first friends of Jesus Christ. The resurrection led them to be people of trust and conviction in the way of Christ for others, the way that had threatened Roman political leaders, the enforcers that executed Jesus for the way of distributive justice for all people, the

¹ John 20:17-18.

dream of God that Jesus died for.² So we attempt the impossible. We express what is clearly beyond us, this thing we call “God.” What else could we utter except figure, type, metaphor, image. Toward the end of the 4th century in an Easter sermon, Gregory of Nazianzus said:

God [is]...like some great sea of being, limitless and unbounded, transcending all conception of time and nature, only sketched in outline by the mind...very dimly and scantily...God’s boundlessness...³

These stories then tell us the risen Christ leads us on the way, as participants, to the dream of God. Karen Armstrong recognized:

This did not mean that Mother Greta did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus, or that she had lost her faith. But she...knew that...the resurrection stories in the gospels...describe the religious convictions of the early Christians, who had experienced the risen Jesus as a dynamic presence in their own lives and had made a similar spiritual passage from death to life...⁴

“*Stop clinging to me! But go...*” Mary Magdalene, who went to the tomb clearly expecting death, finds instead the transformed, living Jesus. Peter and the other disciple are too busy running to and fro to notice. She stays behind. She cries. She waits. She looks. She asks questions. Jesus speaks her name, “*Mary.*” She answers, “*Teacher.*” “*Stop clinging to me! But go.*” She went and knew Jesus lives and Jesus is Lord. Why did Jesus tell Mary “*Stop clinging to me*”? The resurrection is something totally new. It proclaims change. It embraces newness. Nothing will ever be the same again, as if Mary might just somehow settle back into her old life with her teacher. Everything has changed. All is different. “*Stop clinging to me...but go.*” We, like Mary, cling to the past and fear the future. We cannot see what is new in our life and our world. Jesus tells us, don’t hold on to the past, don’t fear the future, but go – now, here, today.

Resurrection appearances commission people for something. Mary is sent out. Serve. Empower. Advocate for others. Work for justice. Go. Do. Be. Live the dream of God. Who is Jesus for me? Jesus is many things: Savior, Christ, Human One, Teacher, Spiritual Guide, Healer, Truth-teller, Confronter-of-evil, Promoter-of-justice. But most of all for me Jesus parts the curtain. Jesus dispels the clouds so I can experience the spaciousness of God. Jesus shows me resurrection in my life. Jesus invites me to participate in the dream of God. Risk. Serve. Empower. Advocate for others. Do justice in Christ's name. In 1982 Sr Helen Prejean became the spiritual advisor to a convicted killer on death row. She reaches out to one victim’s father.

The chapel is warm and close and filled with silence and the smell of beeswax. Lloyd and I kneel on the prie-dieux. He takes his rosary out of his pocket...We “tell” the beads, as the old French people used to say. One at a time - Hail Mary, Holy Mary... Holding a rosary is a physical, tangible act - you touch and hold the small, smooth beads awhile and then let go.

² See Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The Last Week: The day-by-day account of Jesus’s Final Week in Jerusalem* (New York, 2006), pp. 190ff.

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 45.3.

⁴ Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness* (New York, 2004), pp.32f.

“Do not cling to me,” Jesus had said to Mary Magdalene. “The great secret: To hold on, let go. Nothing is solid. Everything moves. Except love - hold on to love. Do what love requires.”⁵

Roger Mahoney, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Los Angeles, instructed his clergy on Ash Wednesday “to disobey a proposed law that would subject them, as well as other church and humanitarian workers, to criminal penalties” concerning the proposed immigration legislation against anyone who “assists” an undocumented immigrant. “I’ve received a lot of criticism,” he said. “The mission of the...Church is to help people in need. It is our Gospel mandate. The church is compelled to take a stand against harmful legislation and to work toward positive change.”⁶

The Archbishop of Canterbury began Lent in Sudan. Dr Williams said:

Pretty well everything, every aspect of that environment, seemed set to remind us that we still lived in a world where the cross was the immediate reality and resurrection hope was definitely a thing of the future...a world untouched by Easter. But one thing you quickly discover...in the Sudan is that there is no occasion free from alleluias...this was not an Easter-free zone... They could not stop saying, singing, shouting, “Alleluia.” If they lived in a long-term Lent, they also lived in an unceasing awareness of Easter. They had come through the horrors of war and oppression with the confidence intact that God was always there on the far side or in the depths of what they were enduring. If everyone else forgot them, God would not and could not. Because he was alive, they could live too... Our brothers and sisters in Sudan...have, quite simply, met the Risen Lord in the darkest times.⁷

We, too, know that from our friends from Sudan.

John Banville in his novel, *The Sea*, has this passage.

In her I had my first experience of the absolute otherness of other people. It is not too much to say – well, it is, but I shall say it anyway – that in Chloe the world was first manifest for me as an objective entity. Not my father and mother, my teachers, other children, not Connie Grace herself, no one had yet been real in the way Chloe was. And if she was real, so, suddenly, was I. She was I believe the true origin in me of self-consciousness. Before, there had been one thing and I was part of it, now there was me and all that was not me. But here too there is a torsion, a kink of complexity. In severing me from the world and making me realize myself in being thus severed, she expelled me from that sense of the immanence of all things, the all things that had included me, in which up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance. Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open, in the clearing, with no shelter in sight. I did not know that I would not get inside again, through that ever straightening gate.⁸

⁵Prejean, *Dead Man Walking*, p. 244.

⁶Roger Mahony, “Called by God to Help,” *The New York Times*, March 22, 2006.

⁷ Article from: *Outlook*, Bryan Harris, editor, ACNS 4135, 12 April 2006, “Anglicans Prepare for Easter,” By the editor, Holy Wednesday 2006.

⁸ John Banville, *The Sea* (London, 2005), pp. 167f.

Once we ask the question...once we experience the Risen Christ as a present reality in our lives...once we know this dream of God about distributive justice, where everyone has enough and the system is fair for all, there is no going back. "Up to then I had dwelt, in more or less blissful ignorance. Before, I had been housed, now I was in the open... I did not know that I would not get inside again, through that ever straightening gate." There is no going back for us anymore. We are out in the open, in the very spaciousness of God. Join people in need as advocates, friends, and political provocateurs. Cooperate with God to create that new world because out of death God brings life, new life, changed life, transformed life, life of a totally different order.

"Do not hold on to me... But go..." [She] went... "I have seen the Lord"...

And we all say: "Alleluia. Alleluia. Alleluia."

The Very Reverend Kenneth W. Poppe
Dean and Rector