

Clinging for Dear Life in the Season of Easter

Colleagues,

We've had two world-publicized instances of clinging to life for Eastertide 2005. One in Florida, one in Rome. To cling or not to cling—and if so, how long? That is the question that got public attention. Theological attention too, though none that I heard—even from the talking heads speaking from and for Rome—got around to the “cling-question” that is the clincher. Namely, “clinging to whom?” And then, bizarre as it may sound, not clinging too soon! To illuminate this angle on the cling-question we offer another Easter sermon from sainted Bob Bertram, Crossings founder. Bob preached this one at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago 15 years ago.

Incidentally, Bob and the last bishop of Rome were born just months apart. I don't think they ever met, even though Bob was a major player in Lutheran-Roman Catholic conversations for many years, the finale of which was the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, officially signed by both the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation on Reformation Day 1999. John Paul II called it “a milestone on the difficult path of restoring full unity among Christians.” We'll probably never know just what the bishop of Rome really thought about the Gospel of justification when he said yes to this document. But if it might have been a tad fuzzy for the pontiff—and even Roman Catholic theologians suggest that—possibly now Bob can clarify it for him. Wouldn't we all like to eavesdrop THAT conversation!

In any case here's Bob's case for the Gospel of justification—though he never uses the term. It's all about Easter and Easter-clinging.

CLINGING FOR DEAR LIFE

John 20:1-18, esp. 13-18

I.

"Do not cling to me." (Jn. 20:17) So says the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb. Not that she should not "touch" him, as the older translations put it. In fact, in the very next scene Jesus literally dares anot her of his folowers TO touch him, nailprints and scar and all. What he is saying to Mary is, Do no hold onto me . . . YET, "because I have not YET ascended to the Father." His rising was almost completed but not quite. He was risen, you might say, but not yet "risen indeed, hallelujah." Now, this last moment just before the climax, was no time to hold him back. Not only for his sake but for Mary's as well. There would soon be time for real clinging, quite bodily clinging. But to cling now, just short of the finish, would be settling for less than the whole resurrection. To cling to only this much Christ was premature, static cling. The risen One was finally out of the woods and on the home stretch, precisely for his clingers. They must not stop him now, so close to home.

Why could Mary Magdalene not let go? For the same reason none of us can. This Christ to whom she clung was, to put it bluntly, a bird in the hand, better than nothing. Let go of that and you're left empty-handed all over again. Mary Magdalene knew about such emptiness and the cynicism it breeds. At least this risen Jesus in the garden was still her kind of

flesh and blood. Who knows what would become of him were he to leave her now and, as he says vaguely, “ascend to the Father”? At least this Christ in Mary’s arms was still bodily the way she was, as bodily as her “Rabbuni,” as bodily as any garden variety gravedigger or – aye, there’s the rub – as bodily as any resurrected Lazarus who could always die again. Still, rather to have and to hold him here and now than to give him up to heaven, wherever that is.

There are whole theologies that think as Mary did. And don’t we all? If Christ is in heaven, so we assume, he is not on earth. Or if he is on earth he is here only as divine, “personally” maybe but no longer as one of us. Bread and wine? Sure. But flesh and blood? God with a human body? Here and now, still? In the Lord’s Supper? Once he’s gone off and “ascended”? That sounds suspiciously like a “line” you’ve been handed before if you’ve ever been jilted. Mary Magdalene had reason to cling. But our Lord had better reason for her not to cling, just yet.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

II.

Said the risen Jesus to Mary Magdalene, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” In fact wasn’t that how Jesus’ Father became also our Father, by Jesus’ presenting God with a new offspring: this time a human one, one of us, yet still himself? Christ ascended back to the Father the same divine Son as always, yes, but this time as the divine Son made flesh, our flesh. The Son whom God had earlier sent into the world came back very different from the Son who had left. In the meantime he has become every bit as human as he always was divine. This was the Son, the evangelist tells us, who had snuggled “in the bosom of the Father.” (Jn. 1:18) (How motherly of God to have a bosom.) Faith can imagine God now

welcoming the Son back, "My, how you have changed, and really for the better; how like dear Mary Magdalene you now are and like all her dear flesh and blood siblings; on you they look good; any Parent of yours is delighted to be a Parent of theirs."

An old Christian confession urges us to "rejoice without ceasing" because the Christ who now reigns at the right hand of God is "our own flesh and blood." (Formula of Concord 9) That being so, that our kind of earthling has made it all the way to Godhood, we can be sure that that flesh of ours, now deified in Christ, is no longer the old garden variety, biodegradable body that Mary Magdalene was tempted to settle for in the graveyard that morning. That was why the risen Lord urged her not to cling just yet. True, the glorified flesh and blood he now bears is still ours, thank God, but now wondrously recycled through the death of his cross, through his open sepulchre and into the very bloodline of the Trinity. It was a good thing that Mary Magdalene, gutsy believer, let him go when she did. He has never been the same since. Nor has God. Nor have we.

That is why Jesus on Easter morning could now begin calling his disciples his siblings. "Go and tell my brothers," he says to Mary Magdalene, who also would now become his sister. That is the first time in the whole long Gospel of John that Jesus referred to them in that family way. The God to whom he was about to return, but now return as one of them, would thereby become their Parent as well. And they would become God's junior deities and the very Son of God's own blood relatives. It is as if our genes have now become the Designer's genes. Now that is genetic creativity. It is not a question merely of God being a mother but rather of God HAVING a mother, a quite human one, the same as ours. To be sisters and brothers IN CHRIST is pretty fast company.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

III.

Says the risen Christ to us THIS morning, this risen INDEED Christ, "Take and eat, this is my body," "Take and drink, this is my blood." Now that, sisters and brothers, is definitely an invitation to cling – hands on, touch and taste and swallow and absorb, as bodily as bodily gets. Or as Jesus is quoted in this same Gospel of John, "Anyone who eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world. . . . Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise [her] up on the last day." (6:51,54)

To THIS flesh and blood, all you dear Magdalenes, dear gutsy believers, feel free to cling – this flesh and blood which has risen not just from death, like Lazarus, but into God and back to us again. For this flesh and blood is no longer terminal like ours. The Eucharist is not cannibalism. This flesh and blood is "for the life of the world," "forever."

THIS body of his IS meant for clinging, for dear life. "Take" it, we are urged. "Take" as in tactile. Take his Word for it but take it for the real and vivifying flesh and blood it is. Take it on faith but take it quite bodily, in to our own eager hands, to our lips, into our weak and mortal bodies. It may come as a shock to the system, but only as life is a shock to death. That is a lot to swallow, but no more than death is when swallowed up by his victory. Take it for what it is worth, our death and resurrection and our joy forever as the offspring of God. Easter morning is happy, yet not as happy as it gets – on all these mornings after, in the Eucharist. Even that is only a foretaste of the feast to come.

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

IV.

This year, 1990, the world (we included) celebrates Earth Day in the same season that we Christians celebrate Easter. That figures. For a God who not only CREATES earth but whose only-begotten BECOMES AN EARTHLING personally and bodily, sharing the earth's curse and death and surviving it still an earthling and still God, and all in order to nurse this poor earth back to health on his own Eastered flesh and blood – such a God must surely qualify as one tough environmentalist.

So ought we not follow suit with a similar godlike love of the environment? Indeed we ought. Still, saying only that much could sound as if we were the centre and everything else were our surroundings. No, we ARE the environment. To God, we are, who IS the centre around whom we gather, we and “the burning sun with golden beam,” (as we shall sing in a moment with Saint Francis) [Lutheran Book of Worship #527] we and the “rushing wind and breezes soft” in this Windy City [=American nickname for Chicago], we and “dear mother earth,” we and “all creatures of our God,” we and even “most kind and gentle death.” We are the environment and God the centre.

Then why do we humans prefer to distance ourselves from the rest of God's environment? Is it merely because we are self-centered? Isn't it rather that we are self-centered because, as Walker Percy puts it, we feel “lost in the cosmos” and so feel threatened by the rest of creation? Yet isn't that also why the eccentric Creator, the very Centre of all, moved out into the periphery with us, taking on our flesh, Christ the earthling? Ever since, wherever he is home is home enough for us. Over in the hallway outside the seminary mailroom, in the literature rack, is an Earth Day poster which reads, “We are trying to

*hold onto the earth.” Saint Francis might have reworded that:
God in Christ IS holding onto the earth, and we therefore,
Christ’s flesh and blood – we and our kin, the plants and the
planets, one earth – have HIM to cling to.*

P: Christ is risen.

C: He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

Robert W. Bertram

Easter, 1990