

More Easter Bits and Pieces from John 20

Colleagues,

We're not quite two weeks into the 2018 Easter season, and again I'm noticing a phenomenon that impresses me more and more as I speed toward retirement in a few years. There is no such thing as milking an Easter text dry. No matter how often a preacher picks it up to shake and squeeze for something fresh to say about God's astonishing Gospel, it yields results, and not only for the hearer still in her Christian infancy, so to speak, but also for the aging preacher.

Take that Gospel reading of two Sundays ago, the second half of John 20. This is the only text assigned to a Sunday that gets heard every year without fail in churches that follow the Revised Common Lectionary. You who are reading this know the passage well. Jesus appears to that little clump of locked-in disciples on Easter night. A week later he follows up with Thomas. Even in translation the text drips with riches. Still more tumbles out when you take the time to scan the Greek and are moved to wonder why the English reads the way it does in certain places. Thomas, for example, starts off not as a doubter but as an obstinate down-to-earth "un-faither"; and as I pointed out at length a couple of years ago, there is good reason to wonder whether Jesus authorizes his newly-Spirited crew [to retain sins or, by contrast, to hang onto sinners](#) (John 20:23b).

Verse 31 snagged my eye this year. It reads thus in the NRSV: "But these [signs, done in the presence of his disciples,] are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Two things shook loose as I rattled the text.

First, I finally noticed an NRSV footnote—it appears also in the NIV translation, though in hardly any others—appended to the phrase “come to believe.” There is, it turns out, an alternative reading, depending on the Greek manuscript you’re looking at. “These things are written that you may *continueto* believe.” The difference lies in a single sigma, the Greek “s.” The word being turned is either “pisteusayta” or “pisteuayta,” the former a future tense, the latter a present tense. The great bulk of ancient manuscripts features the former. The latter appears in a wee handful that includes the oldest ones. I’m glad I at last stumbled across it. I like it better. It rings truer to the reality I contend with in my own heart, and in the lives of the people I serve as an agent of Easter, especially the ones I look at from the pulpit I occupy or the bedsides I visit.

“These things are written”—and endlessly repeated—“so that you may *keep onbelieving*....” Surely that was in John’s mind too when he penned the words. From first to last his Gospel is addressed not to skeptics but to folks who have already been tumbled by the Holy Spirit into Christian confession, where one says of Jesus as Thomas did, “My Lord and my God.” The constant question is whether one will stick with Jesus or not; whether incipient believers will keep believing or drift away in dismay like that herd of vanishing disciples at the end of chapter six; or whether, having stuck as Peter and pals are doing so far (“Lord to whom shall we go? We *have* come to believe...” 6:68-69) they will keep from taking the Judas turn or from babbling their own denials as Peter will shortly do. That the Father should defend them from this is one of the chief threads in Jesus’ great prayer of chapter 17, and the appendage of chapter 21 confirms the prayer’s urgent relevance even for Peter and Thomas post-Easter, though especially for the people John is writing to, besieged as they seem to be to by pressures to cede their loyalties to other faiths, to other lords, and to a god or gods

who have nothing to do with Christ.

Such is our situation too in 2018. Struggle as I might and with as much charity as I can muster, I have yet to fathom how people who call Jesus Lord can cast their political lot with Donald Trump. Having reoffended a few of you by saying that, I may as well irritate some others by wondering also how putative Christ confessors on the left can prostitute themselves to the progressive Zeitgeist, doffing caps, for example, to its insistence that all “religion” is equally efficacious or, more likely, equally useless, especially when it posits a hope that God alone can bring to pass. For such as these, Easter is at best a metaphor, a hint of things to be in future generations when humankind will have evolved enough to behave properly, with peace and justice for all creation, our current job being to get that ball rolling. Am I the only one who hears loud hints of this in the dreck that’s passing for theology these days in mainline circles?

(As long as I’m grinding this ax: a gut feeling has me half-expecting the issuance of a Re-Revised Common Lectionary from which this coming Sunday’s First Lesson will have been excised. That’s the famous—or infamous—passage in Acts 4 where Peter asserts that there is salvation in no one other than Jesus, there being “no other name under heaven given among humankind by which we must be saved.” A Christ-confessor who grasps both Law and Gospel will get that. Both its logic as a theological statement and its magnificent pertinence to our present moment’s pressing ache for “inclusivity” would merit further treatment in one of these posts. For now, the point is merely that lots of mainline preachers this Sunday will find it embarrassing; and if some should drop it from the string of texts the saints are given to hear in their churches, I wouldn’t be at all surprised.)

Back to my chief point: the believing John refers to in 20:31 is for all of us a work in progress. Yes, we believe “that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God,” and no, we don’t; or rather, we believe lots of other things as well, including all too many that contradict our faith in Christ, or, more specifically, the Christ that John bears witness to, as do Paul and Peter and the prophets they cite who went before them. Those alternative convictions are like weeds in a garden. They both conceal and threaten to choke the believing Jesus has in mind for us, this Faith in him that spills into Life through him, which is also Life with the Father. Hence the Life-Giver’s insistence on the ceaseless repetition of those signs John writes about, the ones that underscore the astonishing promise of Christ as much for us as he was for Thomas and Peter and the rest of that first feckless band. With the tools of Word and Sacrament and the agency of the Holy Spirit, he aims to keep us believing however thick the weeds should get, and through that believing to “have life in his name.”

Thus the first of this year’s “mini-ahas” arising from John 20. The second is this: that “life in his name” is as much a gift for the present as it is for the future. The future, of course, is what Sunday School instruction focused our minds on. “When you die, you’ll go to heaven,” to put it abysmally. (More on that too in some future post.) It took me some decades to break loose from that conception. I think most of the saints we are given to feed are still shackled by it. “Eternal life” is “life to come” and only that, or so they imagine. Not so as John tells it. For but one example among many, see the cadenza of Jesus’ “Bread of Life” discourse where he makes two promises to his increasingly restive audience. First, those who “eat my flesh and drink my blood” *have* eternal life; second, he “will raise them up on the last day” (6:54). Of these, the second points without question to the future. The first speaks in contrast of

a present and immediate reality. It echoes Paul's equally great and equally disregarded assertion in 2 Cor. 5:17: "If anyone is in Christ—new creation! The old has passed away. Look! The new has come!"

So where on earth right now are the Christ-confessing folk who dare to take this seriously or even try to? It's one thing to posit it as a lovely idea. It's quite another to put it to work as a description of today's reality. Come to think of it, when I spoke above of breaking loose at last from old Sunday School notions, I was exaggerating. The mind may delight in the testimony of Paul and John; the gut—that locus and seat of genuine believing—is far from buying it. Else I'd do as a matter of course those things that eternal-lifers will do without skipping a beat because such is the stuff that constitutes eternal living. In John's telling, I would forgive real sins and cling like a limpet to real sinners. If Christ-confessing you happened to vote for Trump I would look past that with a Christ-besotted eye on the brother or sister you continue to be. I'd then expect the same of you in turn, though I voted for Hillary. Who knows, we might even have the nerve to thrash over our differences with love abounding even though we failed to resolve them. This is not how the American world is working right now. I state the obvious. It's not how the American church is working either. Shame on the church. It mouths Easter in theory and denies it in practice. Like everyone else we treat the political other as a dead and pestilent other. We do the same, and all the more, when the other's crime is of a personal order. He was rude to me, say. Christ-confessing she, as addled as any by the competing faiths that infect us all, did something no decent person ought to do, and I caught the brunt of it. Standard response? Cut her out of your life—a telling expression if ever there was one. Such things are seen in every congregation; so too in every flocking of church workers I've ever been

associated with. James puts it succinctly: "My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (3:10). To which one adds, as James does not, "Are we not eternal-lifers, equipped in Christ to raise the dead, or at the very least to flip a cruciform bird at death's every appearance? Then do it already! Get busy living!"

Isn't this the real-time thrust of John 20? It's certainly a large piece of the theo-logic that shapes the text studies you get from Crossings. "These things are written so that you may keep believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have [eternal] life in his name." That means exposing our competing faiths as the death-dealing frauds they are. Even more it means a constant bath in the Gospel of Christ crucified, with equally steady reflection on the faith it invites and the life it thrusts us into this very day.

God grant to every Christ-confessing heart a passion for such living.

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Two concluding notes:

First, some of you will have not have heard about the death of Robert C. Schultz on the Monday of Holy Week. I first encountered Bob through his translation of Paul Althaus's *The Theology of Martin Luther*. Althaus was one of the giants on the theological faculty of Erlangen University where Bob earned his doctorate in the late 1950s. Another Erlangen giant, Werner Elert, supervised his dissertation. His first of several teaching positions was at Valparaiso University. I later met Bob at a theological meeting organized by his erstwhile Valpo colleague, Bob Bertram. I saw him after that at several Crossings conferences, where his thoughtful erudition refreshed

many. He had labored in recent years on a fresh translation of Elert's systematic text, *The Christian Faith*, a work that shaped me more than any other I encountered in my seminary years. That fresh translation was still unfinished when the Spirit tugged Bob into the age-to-come edition of eternal life. I knew him just enough to be able, looking back, to spot the sparkle of eternal life in him when he was still with us. I caught it, for example, in the charity and patience he exhibited toward an institutional church that did not always treat him kindly. "Rest eternal grant him, O Lord; and let light perpetual shine upon him."

Second: next week I will launch you on a month of Matthew-Becker, that is. He sent two gifts to my inbox this week. They're the polished texts of his presentations at the Crossings conference this past January, one on Elert and the other on Bertram. Each is long enough to call for two installments in the posting. Keep your eye out, expecting both to work and to be deeply refreshed.

Peace and Joy,
Jerry Burce