

Two Easter Eggs for my Basket Came on Easter Monday

Colleagues,

Two Easter Eggs showed up in my e-mail Easter Basket on Easter Monday. One was Fred Niedner's Maundy Thursday homily at the Valparaiso University chapel from just a few days before. The second was from Hong Kong, from Ed Strohschein, Lutheran missionary there in the People's Republic of China. Ed's Easter basket offering was passed on to me by Cathy (nee Strohschein) Lessmann, long-term manager of the Crossings office here in St. Louis and Ed's sister. [All the Strohschein siblings are "mish-kids." Their parents were first-wave Missouri Synod missionaries to the Philippines right after WW II.]

I'll start with the one from Hong Kong.

Ed Strohschein is a long-term Crossings junkie and an old China hand. He attended university there (Wuhan, I believe), got his first paying job as a business exec for Ralston-Purina in Beijing. With mish-kid blood in his veins, and now a Chinese wife Shauna, he moved over to the calling his dad and mom once heard. Now for many years Ed has been a Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod mission manager working out of Hong Kong.

Back in 1992, when Ed was in Beijing as a businessman, he sent me an email: "Ed, if you can get to Hong Kong, I'll get you up to Beijing and we'll do a Crossings workshop here." I said OK. He went to work and organized a Crossings weekend workshop right there in the capital of the PRC. By the time it was all put together, a team of 8 of us St. Louis-area Crossers (4 guys, 4 gals) made the journey to that venue in China (also a couple more in Korea, Taiwan and Japan) doing Crossings sort of stuff.

At the Beijing workshop, Robin Morgan and Sherman Lee were the leaders for the event. I sat on the side as “observer.”

But back to Ed Strohschein and the Easter egg he dropped in my basket this past Monday. He says he was shocked Easter Sunday morning to open his South China Morning Post newspaper, THE English-language newspaper in Hong Kong and see the big “POSTmagazine” cover with “Christ has risen” as headline. And the full-page picture: a photo of the Forbidden City compound on Tiannenmen Square with a huge portrait of Jesus at the spot where Chairman Mao had for decades smiled down on his people.

The point of the 4-page article (cum additional photos) was that there are now more Christians in China (well over 100 million) than there are members of the Communist Party (74 million). Ed photocopied the cover and article and sent it to us through cyberspace. I’ve read it and Ed’s comment is indeed true: “It really is an amazing cover, isn’t it? We’re quite surprised that the South China Morning Post, our Hong Kong paper, went with such a bold picture on their Sunday magazine cover. So far they haven’t posted the article online. I hope they do soon.” If/when that happens, I (the other Ed S.) will pass on to you ThTh-readers the URL so you can see/read it too.

Now on the other side of the Pacific Ocean, did you see the Easter issue of NEWSWEEK magazine? A fully black cover with these cross-formatted words in the middle: “The Decline and Fall of Christian America.” Cathy Lessmann’s comment about this mind-blowing contrast between “Communist” China and “Christian” America was: “Talk about ‘Platzregen’! – that the Holy Spirit moves and pours down where She will, esp. when the territory She HAS been raining over rejects Her for other gospels.” [Cathy says that if you can’t wait to see the Hong Kong piece, ask her to forward it to you, and she will.]

Segue now to the second Easter egg, Fred's homily for last Thursday. It shows that the Platzregen hasn't (yet) deserted our own land. For such proclamation is itself the very Platzregen "platzing." So I pass it on to you, just in case you are pluvially parched, so you may have—as Bob Bertram liked to say—your own "Eastering." See if, when you get to the end, you're not soaking wet.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

"We used to be slaves. . ."

Maundy Thursday, 2009

The three lectionary texts.

Exodus 24:3-11

3 Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." 4 And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. 5 He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. 6 Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. 7 Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." 8 Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, "See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with

all these words.”

9 Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel went up, 10 and they saw the God of Israel. Under his feet there was something like a pavement of sapphire stone, like the very heaven for clearness. 11 God did not lay his hand on the chief men of the people of Israel; also they beheld God, and they ate and drank.

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Mark 14:12-26

12 On the first day of Unleavened Bread, when the Passover lamb is sacrificed, his disciples said to him, Where do you want us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?

13 So he sent two of his disciples, saying to them, Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you; follow him, 14 and wherever he enters, say to the owner of the house, The Teacher asks, Where is my guest room where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?’ 15 He will show you a large room upstairs, furnished and ready. Make preparations for us there.”

16 So the disciples set out and went to the city, and found everything as he had told them; and they prepared the Passover meal. 17 When it was evening, he came with the twelve. 18 And when they had taken their places and were eating, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me.” 19 They began to be distressed and to say to him one after another, “Surely, not I?” 20 He said to them, “It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the bowl with me. 21 For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that one by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that one not to have been born.” 22 While they were

eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God." 26 When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

At Passover tables around the world in the past 24 hours, the youngest person present has asked the question that starts the seder. "Why is this night different from all other nights? Every other night, we eat all kinds of things, but on this night, we eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs." Others at the table have responded as they do every year, with a story. "Because we were slaves in Egypt," they begin, "but the Holy One, *Adonai Elohenu*, brought us out with a mighty arm and an outstretched hand. If not for that, we would still be slaves."

Jesus and his disciples sat at that same table on the night that we have gathered once more to relive, "the night," as we most often remember it, "when he was betrayed." Someone, a disciple perhaps, asked the opening question, and the rest responded with the story, the great *Haggadah*. "We used to be slaves, but no more, thank God. The Holy One stepped in, and here we are, eating and drinking in freedom-but never forgetting either, the hard, flat bread and the bitter herbs of slavery."

And here we are, gathered at the same table, reliving the night when our Lord relived the night when the angel of death stood ready. We, too, were slaves, but no longer. Into our bondage also, the Holy One came. It will take us all weekend to tell the story. For now, though, we'll relive this one night. It's more than enough to remember.

"Maundy Thursday," we call this day and evening, "*Mandatum* Thursday, Commandment Thursday." And for what commandment has ancient tradition named this day? When I asked that as a child, my elders explained that it was Jesus' commandment that we love one another even as he has loved us, "the new commandment," as Jesus himself called it in John's gospel, in a reading we did not hear tonight. I've never had reason to doubt that answer, and the older I get the better I can see that loving in Christ's way, not our own self-protective way, is the only kind that could take one from bondage to freedom in a world where traitors have gone out into the night to do their work-and where any one of us could be the traitor.

But the longer I live the more I see as well that a host of other commandments govern the reliving of the night when the angel of death would extinguish the light in countless mothers' hearts. The list of commandments begins in the *Torah*: Choose a lamb. Slaughter it at twilight. Paint its blood on the doorpost. Prepare and eat that lamb. Leave nothing. Do all this in haste. (Exodus 12) And when children ask, even many generations from now, 'What does this mean?' you shall say, 'We were slaves, but the Lord brought us out' (Deut 6:20-25). Do not say, 'Our ancestors once were slaves,' but say, 'We were slaves.'

The giving of commandments continues in the story we rehearse tonight, as Jesus says to all who join him at this table, "Take, eat, drink, do this to remember me." "Love one another as I have loved you." "As I have washed your feet, so you shall wash each other's feet."

On that first Passover night so long ago in Egypt, the slaves had no idea what morning would bring. Freedom? None of them had ever tasted it, except in wild dreams. But oh, did they know slavery! And they wanted no more of that. We latter day slaves who gather with our ancient brothers and sisters on this night

may think we're different. We know freedom, and we've never endured slavery, but truth be told, we're every bit as bound and enslaved as any other generation. We mistake the slave-masters who own us for liberators, and we live in a world of self-deception.

I don't need to fear the Pharaoh and all his guys with clipboards who come around checking on how many bricks we made today. I am the Pharaoh. Just ask my students. And we own the clipboards! You doubt me? Come to my office. I have a University-issue clipboard—a Dell Optiplex 755 with a 17-inch monitor and cordless mouse. I can roam the world freely on the World Wide Web and talk to whomever I want on e-mail. Next to that, I have a telephone, and a cell phone, too. (Poor old Moses. His life would have been so much easier if only the slaves had computers and broadband internet service! They could have wrecked the Pharaoh with a clever virus, ordered supplies from Amazon.com, and used Google maps to find a way straight to the promised land. Moses wouldn't have had to listen to all that murmuring.)

Most days you can find me tightly tethered to my fancy, electronic clipboard. My friend Walt Wangerin says I'll some day need a coffin with a bend in it, and a little extension for my mouse arm, because sooner or later I'll surely be ossified in that position, the position of my enslavement.

Walt means that to be funny, but he also knows it's the truth, and we both know it's only the tip of the proverbial iceberg when it comes to recognizing the slaveries in which I toil, and as many of you do as well, no doubt. I'm a slave to my tools, and to so many things related to my work. Deuteronomy says the difference between a slave and a free person is that slaves don't get a Sabbath, a day of rest. Do you get a day of rest? I don't. I work every day, but truthfully, for a part of every day

I steal time, do nothing productive, and feel guilty about it. That's not freedom, but the life of a rebellious, cheating slave!

Actually, I get praised for that slavery, for always being in the position for which Walt has proposed my coffin's design. There are plenty more forms of slavery, however, for which you'd all condemn me if you knew them up close-I'm enslaved to the identity I think I've earned by means of my clipboard busy-ness, and to the belief that I'm better somehow than those who haven't had the same success with clipboards. I'm a dutiful servant to the secret hatreds and prejudices I harbor toward those I interact with every day, to the lusts that sweet-talk me and the jealousies that taunt me every day of my life, and also to the brazen notion that all of this really makes no difference, because most days, the rest of you can't see it, and if I'm careful, neither can God. There's my slavery-it's in all that secrecy and sneaking around, trying my best to look good on your clipboard, and especially on God's.

If you read all of Mark's gospel, or any of the others for that matter, you know that some version of all that was going on in every heart and mind at the table on the night when Jesus sat for a last time with his friends and said, "Someone here will betray me." It's no mystery why every one of them said in response, "Is it I?" It surely could have been. Each knew he could scarcely trust himself, much less anyone else.

But precisely here the story turns. To this group of slaves, bound as they were to every wretched addiction the human heart knows, Jesus handed himself over. "Take, eat," he said. "This is my body." And when they did so, Jesus' words were true not only of the bread, but of them. They were now his body, the body by which he would hand himself over to countless others, first in and around Jerusalem, and then Galilee, and Rome, and eventually

in every place, including this one, where slaves hide out with a duplicitous clipboard and a heart full of secrets. In that moment, he took their lives, and he gave them his. Tonight, one more time, he does the same with and for us. We used to be slaves, but no longer. The Holy One, with broken hands and outstretched arms, has intervened. And now we're free.

What does our freedom look like? It's a precious joke, dear people, something like my friend Walt's joke. From one angle at least, freedom looks just like slavery, or maybe even like a slavery-shaped coffin. Indeed, freedom is a kind of transformed slavery, service of the humblest kind—to our neighbor, our spouse, child, colleague, even to our enemy and the one who betrays us.

Earlier this evening, it took the shape of bending, touching, and gentle words, the words of absolution that dissolve into nothingness all that's come between us. In a few more minutes, it will look like foot-washing, as we gird ourselves with towels, bend low, and wash away the pain, the filth, and the shame of all we've stepped in today.

That's what freedom looks like. The old slavery renders us useless, except to our selfish and insatiable masters, the ones who lurk mostly in our own hearts and who strut about with their fancy clipboards. The free Lord of all, whose body we now are in this world, makes a gift of us, and through us gives life, gives thanks, and sings a song that lifts the lonely, beaten-down hearts it reaches.

And another thing about this freedom: we used to be slaves, but no more, to the lines, walls, and fences that lie between us, the ancient ones between Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female, but also our own, peculiar fault lines, those made of acronyms, shibboleths, cheap orthodoxies, and fears of who

might criticize us or give us a righteous whack over the head with a clipboard.

For the next hour at least, we are free, and particularly free of all those divisions. We are, all of us, nothing more, and nothing less, than a collection of weary, flesh-and-blood souls, sick to death of our slavery, but on this night free to be just this, and this alone-the body of Christ, living in trust and hope, inseparable, serving each other, and headed tomorrow with the courage that freedom gives us to that place just outside the city where we, too, will offer up our lives for the world.

Frederick Niedner
Valparaiso University
Chapel of the Resurrection, Valparaiso, IN
9 April 2009