

EASTER Sermon 2007: AN EASTER WAY OF LIFE

4/8/07 by Dan Stern, Broadview Community United Church of Christ

Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 24:1-12

He rose out of obscurity and made a tremendous impact on people. Fascinated crowds gathered wherever he went, the authorities felt threatened, it seemed old ways were up for grabs. Families quarreled over what he did; many sensed that a new era had begun. Then well before old age: a tragic death, a much abused body, laid to rest. All the joys he brought, all the release and new life, came to a crashing halt. Those closest to him were lost in grief, as were many others. But before long, reports began to circulate that he was alive again. People familiar with his appearance saw him in one place, then another. He always took them utterly by surprise.

Oh – wait a minute, did you think I was referring to Jesus? Everything I’ve said so far has also been said before...about Elvis! Elvis Presley was once a cause for national controversy. Elvis came to a terrible, pathetic end. And indeed, stories continue to circulate that Elvis came back from the dead.

So – what’s the difference? What is the difference between a risen Elvis and a risen Jesus? Is the Man from Mississippi on a par with the Man from Galilee because both are said to have come back from the other side? Or can we dismiss the Elvis reports and keep the Easter story? When we believe one thing or another, what’s really at stake? How much does it matter?

I like Elvis. But Elvis was pretty much a victim of his own worldly success and accompanying addictions. Jesus, we seem to forget, was murdered while yet healthy and vigorous – victimized by the threatened principalities and powers of the Roman Empire. And though some have since claimed Jesus Christ as a superstar, his way of life and teachings have seldom been widely put into practice. “Christianity’s not been tried and found wanting,” said Chesterton, “It’s been found difficult, and left untried.” True, and yet somehow the living Spirit of the Christ refuses to die.

Still marked by the wounds of the cross, the risen Christ appears, offering forgiveness, offering freedom from fear, offering release from violence and captivity. Elvis just doesn’t know how to do any of this for us!

Of course, most of us take our little bits and pieces of comfort when and where we can. Some may have come to church this morning hoping to determine what will happen to us after we die. Maybe we got spruced up for Easter, hoping to latch onto some evidence of our own immortality, to somehow glimpse a way to get free of death and decay. A most understandable urge. But I’m sorry to say: you may walk away this morning disappointed.

Genuine Easter resurrection faith is about something different than walking around in one’s particular skin for eternity. The resuscitation of any particular individual physical body – whether it be that of Elvis, whether it be that of Jesus himself, is not really the point. Joining Christ in a resurrection like Christ’s is not about denying death. We are not here to pretend we’re immortal. The risen Christ feeds a much deeper kind of hunger.

Resurrection is about a whole world completely rearranged. It’s about new heavens and a new earth, as the Isaiah passage puts it. It’s about social justice. It’s about the wolf and the lamb

eating together, each and everyone having what we need, and none hurting or destroying the other. Easter is linked historically with Passover, that even older faith story of liberation from slavery. Both Easter and Passover are meant to be 'subversive memories' – they serve to be solid ground hope in the face of despair and oppression.

You might call the risen Christ is a community organizer. In this sense, the American labor leader Joe Hill has more in common with Jesus than does Elvis. It was said that Joe Hill repeatedly appeared among his friends after his murder by copper mining bosses. The folk song about him puts it this way, "And standing there, as big as life, and smiling with his eyes, Joe says, "What they could never kill went on to organize. Joe Hill ain't dead," he says to me, "Joe Hill ain't never died. When workers strike and organize Joe Hill is by their side, Joe Hill is by their side." Jesus died a wrongful death too – crucified at the hands of Roman imperialists and their fear-filled lackeys. To restore a crucified man to life strikes a decisive blow against the system that caused his wrongful death in the first place. The Elvis who appears is a feel-good memory from the past. The Christ who appears is a genuinely strengthening force for the future. Elvis sightings show him looking his young and handsome best – not too shabby. To the extent we "see" Jesus, though, he is ageless.

And there are no eye witnesses at the precise moment of Christ's resurrection. The gospel accounts of the resurrection are brutally factual. It was close to dawn, but still dark; no trumpets, no choral alleluias. Nothing sweet about it; a very dangerous setting – framed by guards with swords. A few words spoken about an empty tomb, a scrap of a statement that the crucified Jesus had appeared to a few women who the still-sleeping male disciples suspected of telling "idle tales." Is that all there is? Just a few scraps and an empty tomb? Elvis, sighted at shopping malls and fast food restaurants, is far easier for us to conjure!

But the one central thing that all gospel accounts agree on is that Jesus rose up from death. Not death denying. But death defying. And whole lives are transformed. Whole cultures come into being. Cathedrals. Great art. Institutions of higher learning. It all began with a few scraps! It all began with that empty tomb. But what a strangely productive, mysteriously hopeful emptiness this has shown itself to be!

The Elvis appearances leave people astonished but basically unchanged. Encounters with the risen Christ turn whole lives around. Cowardly quarreling disciples, so often uncomprehending and powerless became, through the resurrection, empowered to act, united and brave. So in a very real sense, resurrection happens not just to Jesus, but to all who are impacted by it. Those first disciples were lifted from the narrow tomb of their former existence and thrust into the sunlight of a spacious new life where they were freed to live gratefully. So are we.

The resurrection of Christ is, therefore, no isolated event, no freakish wonder fit for supermarket tabloids. It declares that our separation from God, our alienation from each other, our cowering subservience to decay and suffering, are overcome by a power that knows no equal. This Jesus builds a bridge between our frail humanity and the omnipotence, the utter holiness of God.

This morning of all mornings, let us not come looking for a good dead man, but rather, for a living presence. And let us also know the joy that is at the heart of God. Joy, after all, is God's

final word. We may wonder how God can be ultimately all about joy...all the awful things that happen, the violence, the injustice, the threat of catastrophic war, the stomping upon of creaturely dignity...then our prayers are a loud cry, and rightly so. God hears, God knows, God grieves. The wounds are there, the imprint of pain in the heart of love. But at the deepest level of God's being burns/sheer/joy. Would you want it any other way? Would you rather have a god so enmeshed in the web of sorrow that we could never know whether at the end of the day, joy or sorrow, light or darkness, bright white lilies or plastic garbage, would triumph?

“Why do you look for the living among the dead?” The women at Jesus' tomb were asked. It's a good question. We get so distracted by the cares of dying-away life, distraught by anxiety, angered by pettiness, dulled by routine. We don't pay attention to the ways the resurrected Christ is now, beside us. We continue to weep and wish for that which is already here, that which we think we are still without.

Easter is not a pretty memory. Easter is a whole way of life. We are present today with a God who is alive and among us and will respond to the least flicker of our faith and love. Christ is here. God is glad. Are we? Welcome the One who can lift us out of fear and pain and oppression into the lasting goodness and gladness and total restoration that come from God.