

Easter Epilogue
March 27, 2003

Mary, the first to recognize Jesus after his death and burial, reaches out to hold him as he ascends to God. John's gospel records this scene in which Jesus states matter-of-factly, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." Or as it reads in some versions other than the New Revised Standard, "Do not cling to me."

Blessed of both figurative and literal meaning, there is no doubt that the resurrection must be understood as changing everything. There is no holding on to the past anymore. The cross of Good Friday - the cross bearing the defeated, humbled figure of Jesus - is now the empty cross of Easter. The man laid in the grave is the risen Lord, our Savior. Love has vanquished the darkness; smiting even death in the process. All that has happened by God's good grace reminds me of the first verse of the song The Great Storm is Over.

"Thunder and lightning gave voice to the night
The little lame child cried out in her fright
Hush little baby, a story I'll tell
Of a love that has vanquished the powers of hell."

Change is in the air! Life has forever been transformed. God has acted for all eternity. No, Mary, don't hold on to what has been. Don't cling to your old beliefs.

"Alleluia, the great storm is over
Lift up your wings and fly."

Friday evening, Linda and I attended a performance of The Seven Last Words of Christ, a musical offering by Theodore Dubois, written in 1867. The most moving of the seven words was the first - "Father, forgive them." As the entire chorus, some 30 people, sang angrily and harshly, almost shouting "Take him, Crucify Him," it was the pleading, soothing voice of Jesus that rose over the tumult, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Could there be a more pronounced contrast than this, between the old and the new. The world crying out for violence and the Christ that speaks the word of forgiveness. "Do not hold on" to the past, but sing the song of love. The resurrection makes all things new. "Cling no longer" to resentments and hatreds. Yes, all is made new in resurrection love.

"Release for the captives, an end to the wars
New springs in the desert, new hope for the poor
The little lame children will dance as they sing
And play with the bears and lions in spring."

Ultimately Jesus is saying that "now it is your turn." God has acted. "Now live as if all was transformed." Live as if Easter has really made a difference in your lives. Live as if God's light is in you and you have the power to stand firmly and confidently whenever

darkness tries to face you down. Live as if you truly believe that God is with you, empowering you with courage ... enabling you to face your fears.

I wish it was this easy, of course. I wish we could live as if, as the Easter People we claim to be, we really believed that God had sent the powers of Hell running like dogs and cats with a tail between their legs!

It is not easy to live as if we were transformed! Like you, I have heard for the last ten days the news reports of Terry Shiavo and the attempts to keep her alive. I am sure we all have feelings about this issue. While we might differ on how we would like to see things proceed, there is little doubt that we could agree on two things - that it's a complicated matter and that we wish it were not such a media circus.

Maybe I have missed it, but through all this I have yet to hear anyone from the religious community, at the very least, raise the word of Easter's promise. I have heard how it would be a tragedy if she died on Easter. I have heard a clergy person quoted as saying, "We need courageous action to keep Terry from dying." But I have not heard the voice that asks, "Didn't Easter affirm that Jesus died to set us free from the power of death?" Everyone is acting so scared. Yes, life is precious. Life is not to be taken lightly. But shouldn't someone's counsel be heard amid the fear - Remember, "Nothing shall separate us from the love of God, neither life nor death." Didn't God give us the courage to face death? Without that claim, we hold to what was. We cling to the past. We deny that Jesus died for us so that we might all one day be with God!

I live in the great State of Maine, where once again, for the umpteenth time, the politicians are discussing adding "sexual rights" to the State's human rights laws. Most interesting, as I observe the discussion, are the comments of Richard Malone, who is the Bishop presiding over Maine's Catholic community. Although he writes that he abhors intolerance towards members of the gay community, he won't back the proposed new statute because it might lead to same sex marriage or civil unions.

Isn't it time to state what needs to be stated and worry about other matters later. The God of the empty cross speaks of love. Love for all people. There is no remaining neutral on such a matter. Jesus lived, died and rose for all of us! Let go of the past and live in the light. Live as if fear truly has no hold on you. Live with boldness. Not in silence. The empty cross is not neutral about love. Live as if there is truly a new spring through the desert!

"The great storm is over
Lift up your wings and fly."

We wish it was easy, living as the Easter People! As these two examples suggest - it is never easy.

There is the old story, still a good one, that tells how "One Sunday morning an old cowboy entered a church just before services were to begin. Although the old man and his clothes were spotlessly clean, he wore jeans, a denim shirt and boots that were very worn and ragged. In his hand he carried a worn out old hat and an equally worn out Bible.

The church he entered was in a very upscale and exclusive part of the city. It was the largest and most beautiful church the old cowboy had ever seen. The people of the congregation were all dressed with expensive clothes and accessories. As the cowboy took a seat, the others moved away from him. No one greeted, spoke to, or welcomed him. They were all appalled at his appearance and did not attempt to hide it.

As the old cowboy was leaving the church, the preacher approached him and asked the cowboy to do him a favor. "Before you come back in here again, have a talk with God and ask him what He thinks would be appropriate attire for worship here."

The old cowboy assured the preacher he would. The next Sunday, he showed back up for the services wearing the same ragged jeans, shirt, boots, and hat. Once again he was completely shunned and ignored. The preacher approached the man and said, "I thought I asked you to speak to God before you came back to our church."

"I did," replied the old cowboy.

"If you spoke to God, what did he tell you the proper attire should be for worshipping in here?" asked the preacher.

"Well, sir, God told me that He didn't have a clue what I should wear. He says He's never been in this church before."

Let's make sure that God would recognize us if God ever entered this church on a Sunday. Do we live as if death is truly not something to be feared? Do we take forgiveness seriously? Jesus died as he forgave others! Are we committed to a world of tolerance, acceptance and diversity or do we cling to past prejudice and scorn? Are we willing to live as the voice of the voiceless poor, those who are so often overlooked and neglected? Do we stand against the violence of women, abuse of children, the neglect of prisoners, believing that such acts are an affront to God's intentions to treat people humanely? Are we convinced (truly convinced) of the need to put an end to war?

Let's make sure that God will recognize us as the people of Hope and Promise. We are asked, as Mary was, to let go. It is hard to break habits that hold us captive. I am set in my old ways, just as you are in yours. But in Jesus, we are set free. Through faith, our chains are broken. "The light shines in the darkness; the darkness has not (and never will) overcome it." Each story you choose to write - of God's goodness and mercy - is part of the unfolding narrative of Easter. An epilogue to the Resurrection of God's love for all. Let's write that Epilogue...as God's people who pray for love, justice and peace, knowing that we live by the God who does make all things new.

"Alleluia, the great storm is over
Lift up your wings and fly."