

Premature Conclusions: A Retrospective

Romans 5:1-5; John 20:19-31

(Second Sunday of Easter – March 30, 2008)

I thought it might be interesting to look back on this second Sunday of Easter as if the resurrection had not taken place. What might life look like just prior to the Jerusalem experience and what we know now that helps us put the events in their proper place? It will help us see just how important the Easter faith is for us when we realize how it can affect our outlook and perspective for the rest of our lives.

Jesus' disciples had now been with him most of three years. Much of it had gone quite well. His teaching, inspiring, encouraging, bringing healing and hope all over Galilee had been unprecedented and well-received by most. On at least two occasions, thousands of people had gathered on the spur of the moment to listen to him. Lives were changed. And excitement and expectation were awakened wherever he went.

More ominous, but nonetheless gratifying, had also been the number of times when he took on some officious, pompous, and hypocritical people. He had a delightful way of exposing, with only a few words or a question or two, their moral bankruptcy and their self-promoting false piety. On balance, then, it had been quite good and even exciting as far as it went.

If one asked, though, "Has the world really been changed as a result of the things he had said and done these last three years in Galilee?" one had to admit that the answer was, "No, not really."

Nice as were the majority of good-hearted people who came out to hear him and see him, like any "general public" some were only there out of curiosity. Undoubtedly others had personal agenda (being healed, looking for information about the future, or hoping he'd lead a popular revolt. Remember, too, that a substantial number of those oppressed, beaten-down people had long since lost their ability to trust anyone or have much hope that anything was ever going to make any real difference to them.

"How about his disciples," you ask, "the twelve cohorts who had been with him day in and day out for all those months?" Actually, one could have expected more from them. If one reads between the lines, it's clear that they were still quite rough around the edges. True, some of them had occasional flashes of insight or little spurts of growth. But they all complained a lot, quarreled over trivial matters, competed with each other, and were

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remarkably dense when it came to understanding what he was trying to get across through the things he did and taught. They certainly hadn't coalesced into anything anyone would have described as a single-minded, well-disciplined, spiritually mature brotherhood or community. No. Were something to happen to him, the odds were that all or most would scatter back to fishing, tax-collecting, tent-making, begging – who knew what?

As to Jesus three years having changed the way God was understood in the country as a whole, there was very little evidence of that being so. Organized religion there had turned out to be militantly ingrown, hide-bound, and defensive. The religious establishment – the priests, the theologians and other professionals -- was at best, indifferent and uninterested, and more recently had become openly hostile, working to discredit him.

So after three years of constant, earnest, imaginative, diligent, trying, it was difficult to find evidence that it had worked. Had Jesus come to one of us to discuss it, we would have had to have been brutally frank with him, maybe saying something like: “Jesus, please try to take this in the right spirit. I'm afraid that spending virtually all of your time among the powerless, marginal, semi-dysfunctional people, and using that “low-key,” “down-home” approach of yours in trying to become God's presence, just hasn't worked. Being so critical and adversarial toward traditional religion really hasn't helped either. After three years you have no organization, no leverage, no power base. You did give it your best, though. And there have been some great moments, unforgettable ones. And I'm certain it wasn't all wasted either.”

“It's time now, though, to recognize that it hasn't gone anywhere. Perhaps it wasn't meant to be. How about writing a book or joining that religious commune over by the Dead Sea, or you might run for mayor of Nazareth. You have the raw talent to do any number of things. But please, Jesus, don't keep beating a dead camel, until something very bad happens. It could, you know.”

It had to look something like that, even to sympathetic observers as Jesus headed toward Jerusalem. “What's wrong with him, anyhow? He just doesn't know when he's beaten. I fear that he's going to end up in big trouble and that he won't survive. What a waste that would be!” Again, friends, this is a retrospective, looking back before he enters Jerusalem.

There's a powerful image for arriving at a juncture like this in life in Ernest Hemingway's novel, “The Old Man and the Sea.” Santiago is a fisherman. He's had a difficult,

unproductive and depressing year. Now he's going out for the last fishing trip of the season, hoping against hope that this time something will go right.

He hooks a gigantic fish. His guess is that it weighs 1500 pounds. If true, it would be the largest fish ever caught in those waters. The fish's size is at the outside limit of what he can handle with his little boat, with his equipment and without assistance. Afraid that his fishing line will break, he ties it around his body and then around the mast of the boat, so that if this huge fish lunges, his own body will absorb some of the tug and thereby keep the line from snapping. One could say that made it a direct, "personal" struggle between Santiago and the fish. Then, for forty-eight hours (two days and two nights) the man and the fish struggle against each other. Finally the fish grows weary and Santiago is able to reel it in close enough to the boat to harpoon it. By all indications, he has prevailed and his tremendous effort is vindicated.

The fish, though, is far too large to bring on board by himself, so he ties it behind and heads for home, towing it. But now the blood from the fish begins to attract sharks. Santiago, though he is already in a state of near-total exhaustion, desperately tries to club the sharks away. Despite his valiant efforts, they keep right on coming, tearing off huge chunks of flesh. Santiago is powerless to prevent them from doing so.

So, when Santiago finally arrives at the beach after his incredible effort and ordeal, there is nothing left but the skeleton of that into which he has valiantly poured himself.

It's a poignant image, that of ignominiously towing home a skeleton. It is, though, a good metaphor for what people frequently feel has been the culmination of their own most earnest, dedicated perseverance. Cruelly mocking what was their vision, all that they've given, all that they risked is the empty skeleton of the dream.

You can come up with dozens of examples. It happens, for example, in people's jobs and vocations. After having invested most of their adult lives in a vocation or profession, some capricious change intrudes into it, devouring the fulfillment that had once been there for them, or making their skill now irrelevant, or otherwise disillusioning them. After all their dedicated decades, they end up towing home the skeleton.

There has certainly been a financial equivalent in the thousands and thousands of foreclosures in recent years. In this case it has been home ownership, presented to people in unrealistic terms, and in their hasty and thoughtless judgment, leading to financial disaster,

both for them, the lending agencies, and the country as a whole. Like the sharks stripping the bones of Santiago's great fish, carnivorous entities eviscerated people's dreams.

When a marriage ends in divorce, often one or the other feels as if the worth and meaning of her efforts and commitment has been turned into a sick joke. She sacrificed, she suffered, she begged, she was patient, she forgave, but after nineteen or maybe twenty-nine years, it's all stripped away, ruined, down the drain. There are only the bones of what was. (At least it feels that way.)

Parents have sometimes felt that they were towing home the skeleton in regard to their children. It isn't that they didn't love them well, that they weren't diligent, attentive, and sacrificial and imaginative in their child-raising, or that they hadn't bothered to surround their kids with solid values and moral principles. They did all of that. But for no discernible reason, the son or daughter turns out to be a "walking disaster," wants nothing to do with them, seems driven to make the most self-destructive choices possible. What's one supposed to make of it when the leering skeleton is all that seems to be left of the parenting? It's not supposed to work that way.

Whether those experiences or any number of similar ones, that kind of juncture in life leaves a person terribly vulnerable. What's so dangerous is the temptation to "arrive at a conclusion." That is, after all, what we've been taught to do, isn't it? We're supposed to face up realistically to the hard facts, supposed to admit that we're beaten when it's now unmistakable that we've been pouring our efforts down a rat hole. We're cautioned all through life, about what stupidity it is to keep beating our heads against a brick wall.

First, let it be said, there IS truth in that. There really is. But it keeps turning out that for every absolute, sure-and-certain truth like that, there's another truth that is off 180 degrees in the opposite direction. This is no exception.

Had Jesus arrived at a final conclusion based on the lack of measurable success, and based on how close he still was to "square one" influence-wise, we never would have heard of him. He would have "hung it up," sent his disciples back to whatever were their jobs, and lived out his life as a conservative carpenter, who sometimes did motivational speaking at workshops and retreats.

It was his refusal to arrive at what was the obvious, final conclusion, was his going beyond the conventional wisdom, was his seemingly "blind certainty" that there was more here than

met the eye, that made all the difference in the world -- literally. That is a picture to keep firmly in mind anytime you or I end up with only the skeletal remains of what was “supposed to be.”

Beware of the tauntingly obvious conclusions that come packaged with the disappointing outcome, with the discredited dream, with the success that came all unraveled, with the vision that seems now to have been a hallucination. Frustrating and demoralizing as those are, they don't prove what they seem to. In fact, the only thing that they really DO prove is that in a world and a life that is as free as this one where God has placed us, anything can happen or fail to happen.

Right here is where one's faith can make all the difference. One part is the faith that no matter how it feels – notwithstanding that barren skeleton – NO authentic caring, loving, giving, or struggling was or is wasted or lost.

Whether it was a marriage, a vocation, a friendship, or a dream that disintegrated, it is NOT TRUE “that it was 13 years completely wasted,” that those decades of work and commitment are all down the drain, or that “your sacrifice was meaningless.”

In other words, that horrible year, for example, that led up to the miserable divorce, didn't undo or make wrong the seventeen years that preceded it. It may not feel like it, but still intact and real are all of the non-dramatic, semi-forgotten chapters that were good, that brought growth, that offered their own quiet kinds of joy and fulfillment. Bad outcomes do not and cannot destroy the wisdom, the sensitivities, the deep places that were carved in you. NOR do they undo what God was able to create and build out of the carings, the self-givings, the turnings of the other cheek, and the other nurturings and hopes you planted and more often than not, forgot.

Closely related to that is the other way in which a faith is so crucial here, and I'm talking about an Easter faith. In addition to what YOU uniquely channeled into life in the way of good, of creativity and of influence, is God's piece of it.

This is faith in its rawest form: faith that the absurd skeleton notwithstanding, God's work, God's creating, God's improvising, God's process is still alive and well. Even if you or I never get to glimpse the whole process, count on it: it will be seen by those who look back on it.

It's this quality of faith – the one that can appear for awhile to be sheer naivete or stupidity -- by which Jesus headed toward Jerusalem despite the strong probability of his dying there,

despite the subsequent demoralization and scattering of his disciples that might then take place, and notwithstanding that it result in the loss or garbling of all that he had hoped to accomplish there these last three years.

What we end up seeing here, is that what are supposed to be final verdicts, absolute conclusions arrived at, morals-of-the-story, and obvious inevitabilities just aren't what they're cracked up to be. No, they keep turning out to be gravely premature at best, and often dead wrong.

As a minimum, it's important to know what these kinds of experiences DO NOT mean. They are not proof of utter futility, or naivete, or misguidedness of what went before. They certainly do NOT destroy or unravel the good that was previously planted and nourished and unobtrusively became woven into our life together. They are not an indication, either of God's disapproval or God's absence or God's disinterest in what is going on. They are not permission to quit hoping, or a call to "face up" to being a loser, or an admonition to be very cautious from here on.

No, just as often, if not more often, IF we can keep from jumping to a conclusion, these junctures turn out to be the incredibly eloquent one's of a person's life. At least it turned out that way with Jesus, when, unbelievably, with that dozen nervous, scared, not-very-happy disciples, and coming from three inconclusive years in Galilee, he turned his face toward Jerusalem and it somehow altered the course of history. Happy Eastertide!