

# IMAGINATION AND RECOGNITION: THAT'S WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

Easter Morning, 2008 Commentary

Gospel Text: John 20:1-18

*The discovery of the empty tomb from John's version of the resurrection story.*

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

First, let me just say, with all the sadness and trauma going on in the world these days, it is worth reflecting on the passing of one very important person; a death which almost could have gone unnoticed this holiday amongst the Easter lilies, chocolate covered bunnies and colored eggs.

I'm referring, of course, to the news of the passing of Mr. Larry La Prise, the man who wrote the childhood song we all know and love:

You put your right foot in,  
You put your right foot out;  
You put your right foot in,  
And you shake it all about.  
You do the Hokey-Pokey,  
And you turn yourself around.  
*That's what it's all about.*

It was reported Mr. LaPrise died peacefully at age 93. As it turns out, the most traumatic part for his family was getting him into the coffin. They put his left leg in. Then the trouble started ... !

(Thanks to our friend Erika for pulling my leg the other day, and passing the story along.)

But it leads me to ask, *is that what it's all about?* Is this religious holiday simply about the irrepressible nature of the One who creates, redeems and sustains us to keep us out of the grave forever? That's what believers of the Easter story have to say about Jesus, don't they? And, more importantly, about us. Isn't it St. Paul who says since we die like him, we too shall be raised like him?

Or is it when we live *with* him, we shall be raised *with* him. In him, we say, *is* life. He is the way, the truth and the life. What, then, is his way of life. And just who *is* the one whom God has raised?

Of all the different ways in which the risen Lord of Life is known (or owned) – for there seems to be a multitude of different understandings of the man -- *which one did God raise?* Which one does God show us to be the one in whom we can know what it is to live eternally in God? For, in the end, even before you put your left foot in – followed by the rest of everything you would call your life – *that's what it's all about.*

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Well, looking back on the week that was, we all came across two words I've never used together in quite the same way. The first word was Jeremiah, and the second one was Wright. Before last week, Jeremiah was just one of those heavyweight Old Testament prophets, who risked life and limb telling it like it was.

Prophets are those irksome truth-sayers who are willing to risk our displeasure by revealing the secrets in our hearts. False prophets are merely irksome.

But in Jeremiah Wright's case, the question on the lips of politicians, pollsters, political pundits and the public at large seemed to be more about our discomfort and outrage of his once-accusatory words, than the potential veracity of his stinging indictment. The general consensus: this Wright was wrong. This Chicago preacher was wrong with his inflammatory, over the top language used in a few of his sermons delivered over the course of decades of preaching. Even his most famous former congregant said so.

But Obama also said he wouldn't disown the man; as he explained in high-oratorical fashion with his remarks on the issue of race in America. It wasn't merely the kind of speech rarely seen or heard in American politics. The consistent message advanced a position about the wiser course of remaining engaged with those with whom you may disagree.

Most pundits were amazed the savvy politician didn't do the safe, expedient thing and throw this former spiritual adviser "under the bus." The better question might have been this: *Which* man do you hang out to dry? The preacher, teacher, former Marine, social activist and community leader, the pastor to thousands of the marginalized and disenfranchised over the course of decades of faithful ministry? If you're gonna crucify the guy, maybe you oughta know who it is you're really nailing to the cross. Then again, maybe -- in the secrets of our hearts -- we have an inkling; and we don't like what we see.

For over two dozen years I preached weekly in a far more modest public arena to an average of 100-150 sets of ears. With that backlog of experience my first reaction to the "explosive" Jeremiah Wright story was, so what? Is this the first time we've seen video footage of a zealous preacher fomenting at the mouth about this or that? The cable networks are filled with televangelists who purchase 30-minute time slots to sling all sorts of hash and rehash. Some of them have even attended prayer breakfasts at the White House.

Even as a mild-mannered preacher myself, I could imagine someone occasionally cutting loose with that very counter-cultural part of the gospel that had gotten under a preacher's skin just one too many times -- and told it like it was; at least what, for him, it's all about.

And he would be preaching to those who would judge his words, not on the basis of broad-based reaction of the mob who didn't know him, but from the heart of one man's experience to a community of believers who had come to understand the message of a certain Jesus -- whether "right or wrong" -- in ways that this one preacher had genuinely experienced the Word.

Perhaps that is why, in the case of Rev. Wright, one of his now-famous, former congregants would not disown the man. As Barack Obama confessed with a sense of obligation, if not gratitude, it was his pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who "brought him to Christ."

When that line was offered up, I immediately thought to myself: Now if only those given the opportunity -- the press, media and commentators -- had had the gumption or a deeper level of discernment to take this comment as an invitation to go deeper and have a serious discussion; to ask how the Pastor "brought" the Senator to *which* Christ?

His campaign manager has gone to great lengths to reassure the American public Barack is a Christian -- of the Baptist variety, I believe. So is Hillary and Bill, I think. McCain's a Presbyterian, isn't he? And George Bush was raised an Episcopalian; which, some would say kept him on ice among the frozen chosen, until he could be born again and come to "know" the same Christ as the rest of 'em. At least, it seems, all the covey of political strategists can assert with a sigh of relief none of the current candidates left in the winnowing field are Mormon; or worse, Muslim.

But the One whom both George and Barack say they have come to know, *who is he?* Who is this risen Christ? Who is the one whom all who profess to be a Christian calls the Lord of their life?

I tell you, when I heard all the flap about this Jeremiah Wright, I had to laugh to myself. I thought of all the times I would be given the opportunity to push the envelope with those who would come to church and sit quietly and listen to my earnest exposition of the scriptures, as best I was able to discern them.

I'd come up with a message, for better or worse, not just out of the scholarship of my head, but out of the experience of my life as well. I believe the more authentic message comes through best when you come to know the *whole* preacher; who regularly wrestles to keep head and heart in sync.

When I would preach to those indulgent listeners who knew me well, I would look out gratefully on a crowd of familiar faces. Some would smile and nod enthusiastically; others would just smile, and some would just nod off. Still others would sometimes

squirm in their seats, and one or two would occasionally hang their head in their hands. (I had a particular fondness for those latter folks who would nonetheless return week after week.)

Fortunately, before the worship hour was over, we would then all pray together some more, exchange the peace of Christ both given and received, and break bread together before we filed out of the sanctuary and *engaged* – rather than disowned or repudiated – one another.

Even now, of all the things some of us still share together these many years later, we know at least two things to be true: We are one in the risen Christ, whoever he is. And together we still seek to know this risen Christ. As we say in the beckoning prayer, “Be present, O risen One, and be *known* to us in the breaking of bread.”

But it still begs the question, who then *is* the one who is raised from the dead? The one in whom our hope, faith and promise of new and everlasting life is given us with the gift we simply call Easter? That’s the question. That’s what it’s all about.

The various gospel traditions ask and answer this question, each in their own ways, with the different accounts of the resurrection story. Mark’s version has one young man dressed in white, sitting in an empty tomb and telling the women the risen One has gone ahead of them to Galilee. And presumably, they don’t say a word to anyone about it.

In Matthew’s version, the women run into Jesus himself, who tells them to go tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee.

Luke has two men in dazzling white asking the women why they’re looking for the living among the dead. One can readily extrapolate for oneself and see how one early gospel tradition was asking this question on several levels. The women tell the disciples what they’ve seen (and not seen); and the recipients of the good news dismiss it as an idle tale until Peter confirms the tomb is empty. It’ll take the post-resurrection Emmaus story, when the risen Lord illuminates the scriptures in disguise; and is only known (seen at last) in the breaking of the bread, as he vanishes from sight, and their *expanded imagination* leads to *greater recognition*.

And finally, there is today’s reading from John, the latest and last of the four gospels. Two disciples find the remnants of a former life in the empty tomb. But it’s the lone figure of Mary Magdalene who encounters the risen Lord in the garden. Here we have the gospel furthest removed from the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth; yet which claims the most vivid exchange

and encounter with the new life of the risen Christ -- except for the fact that, left to her own ability to see it, she doesn’t recognize him!

John’s gospel has been written to a group of early believers who had never known the earthly Jesus; but could only then know the risen Christ (just like you and me). Further, it is often pointed out John’s account entrusts so much of this startling story to a woman, of all people. Mary, a symbol of the most disenfranchised of us all, is the one to whom the risen Christ is first revealed. Yet even *she* initially fails to recognize her Lord, her *rabbouni*, her love, her Lord.

In Mary, even the one who had followed more adoringly -- and certainly more courageously than those skittish, half-hearted disciples -- couldn’t have imagined what God could do. Even she hasn’t enough imagination to afford her recognition of who the risen One really is. Even Mary -- the one whose own heart had been broken with grief -- even she doesn’t recognize her Lord when he appears to her with the dawn of a new day.

Even when he speaks to her and asks why she weeps, his voice is unfamiliar. “Imagining him to be the garden,” John tells the tale, *she asks her own risen Lord where he is!* She can only imagine he must be elsewhere; and that the one she longs to see must be someone other than the one who stands before her.

Do not overlook the bluntness of the message in the gospel here: She does not recognize, does not know, who the one who stands before her really is. John’s early community of believers were already asking themselves, Who is he? And what’s he all about? And, given a little imagination, might we better recognize who he really is?

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Poor Mary, we think. Was it just early dawn, when the fleeting shadows play tricks, and her eyes are bleary and swollen from all the tears? Or is it the fact that -- of all the people she could have imagined would have been in the graveyard at that hour of the day -- she couldn’t imagine the one for whom her heart ached could have been the one standing before her. She couldn’t, that is, until *he calls her by name*; and she finally recognizes him, his voice, his presence.

Like John's community of believers we are now left with another perennial Easter to only imagine – imagine and discern – who it is who stands before us and calls us each by name. Who is the one who we may not – in all our presumptions – recognize? Who is the one God has raised up for us? And *in whom* are we granted the promise of life -- deep, abundant life everlasting? Again, *which Jesus* is the risen Lord?

Over thirty years ago there was another controversial preacher, teacher, social critic & lay theologian named William Stringfellow, who wrote about all the different *kinds* of Jesus people think they would recognize if they saw him. He wrote what was considered by many to be some rather inflammatory remarks about "Innocuous Jesus:"

Most churchfolk in American Christendom, especially those of a white bourgeois rearing, have, for generations, in both Sunday School and sanctuary, been furnished an impression of Jesus as a person who went briefly about teaching love and doing good: gentle Jesus, pure Jesus, meek Jesus, pastoral Jesus, honest Jesus, fragrant Jesus, passive Jesus, peaceful Jesus, healing Jesus, celibate Jesus, clean Jesus, virtuous Jesus, innocuous Jesus. Oddly enough, this image of Jesus stands in blatant discrepancy to biblical accounts of the ministry of Jesus familiar to everyone; by which Jesus is known to have been controversial, to have suffered poignantly, to have known complete rejection of intimates no less than enemies, and to have been greeted more often with apprehension than acclaim.

More particularly, this notion of an innocuous Jesus contradicts the notorious and turbulent events ... in which the historical Jesus is pursued as a political criminal by the authorities, put to trial and condemned, mocked and publicly humiliated, executed in the manner customarily reserved for insurrectionists, and, all the while, beheld by his followers with hysteria and consternation. ... Before that ... it is only when his parables or his works became notorious (the ... the raising of Lazarus) that the authorities move against Jesus.

Why do the rulers of the world regard Jesus so apprehensively? Why is he an offense—and a threat—to their regime? The answer that emerges ... is that in teaching and in healing Jesus bespeaks and demonstrates an authority and capability over the power of death, and it is that very same power of death in the world which supplies the only moral sanction for the state, or its adjacent ruling principalities. This Jesus preached and verified a freedom from captivation in death which – even now -- threatens ... the politics of this age. The ... very events which have been most private or most discreet in Jesus' ministry take on the most momentous political meaning.

Looking backward from the story of Easter morning to the life of Jesus given us in the gospels, we realize who this Jesus has been from the start: from Herod's attempt to murder the child, through the wilderness temptations to submit to the power of death, his life and death is a

confrontation with the political power of this world. ... And it is *this* Jesus who promises his disciples they will receive and share through his triumph over the power of death in that same authority and capability over death in this world.

I considered these once-controversial comments -- challenging us to ask *which Jesus?* -- as I read two articles in the morning's newspaper.

The first article reported the death of four more of our nation's military personnel, killed in America's war in Iraq; bringing the total to an even 4,000. The number, while significant, pales in comparison to the staggering number of uncounted Iraqis, upon whose streets we have selectively chosen to wage our own war on those with whom we have become so estranged that we can only repudiate them, and try to eradicate them from the face of the earth.

I then thought how on this Easter morning, the expansive hillside in our neighboring community of Lafayette is now almost completely covered with a sea of 4,000 white crosses. At the first light of dawn, it might look like a white-robed army of martyrs, standing shoulder to shoulder; while the still-green wild grass and California poppies push up irrepressibly out of the spaces in between them. In a way, it's just another hill, with crosses on it; and women weeping from a distance.

But look again, and with a little imagination afforded us from the gospel, might we have eyes to see the risen One? Might we, in fact, look for the living among the dead? And, if we could, what might he say to us, if we had ears to hear, when he calls us each by name?

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The second article in this morning's paper is entitled, "Obama's talk may fuel Easter sermons"

This Easter Sunday, the holiest day of the Christian calendar, many pastors will start their sermons about the Resurrection of Jesus and weave in a pointed message about racism and bigotry, and the need to rise above them.

The article continues,

Many ministers said they would preach without explicitly mentioning Mr. Obama because they wanted to avoid

alienating politically diverse congregations. They are also aware that some churches accused of making political endorsements have seen their tax-exempt status investigated by the Internal Revenue Service.

Praise Jesus, I no longer have to worry about that. The article continues,

The response to the controversy from the pulpit will vary, of course, depending on a church's denomination, racial composition and political and theological leanings, as well as the predilections of the pastor.

My readers still have to worry about that ...

The Rev. Leith Anderson, president of the National Association of Evangelicals and lead pastor of Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minn., said he would not be preaching about the issues raised by Mr. Obama's speech and expected few other evangelical pastors to, either. "Easter is about Easter and the Resurrection of Jesus, and it's pretty unlikely that any other topic would eclipse that," Mr. Anderson said. Most evangelical churches, he said, "are Bible-driven, not current-events-driven."

"Bible-driven, not current-events-driven?"

*Sometimes* I just shake my head and wonder just who is this Jesus of contemporary American Christianity? This Jesus that so many have come to know and follow in his name? He just doesn't look or sound like the one I've come to know; the one by whom all other controversial prophets and preachers pale in comparison; and the one who has called my name.

Reluctantly -- and half-heartedly, if I'm honest about it - - I see so much that is so plainly evident in all the self-betraying and self-serving priorities of our way of collectively living in this world; of which, I readily confess, I am an often-willing and sometimes-unwilling participant.

And still, there is an irrepressible reality about the appearance of this One God has raised; who not only creates, redeems and sustains *my* life, but a certain *kind of a life, a certain way of life.*

It is the way of *this* kind of a Jesus, who would call us each by name; that we might have a little more imagination; and, with a little more imagination, recognize *this* One to be the risen One, and Lord of our Life.

On this, and every, Easter, that's what it's all about.

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