

GONE, BUT NOT REALLY

--On the Christian calendar, there is Easter the day, then there is, as you may have noticed from the header on your bulletin this morning, Easter the season.

Easter the day, of course, was observed last Sunday. Easter the season begins today and continues for several weeks to Ascension Sunday, which this year occurs on June 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Easter the day is celebrated as the morning where the resurrection is completed, as evidenced by the fact that Jesus' tomb is found empty. The body is gone. However, suggesting that the resurrection experience is something which lasts longer than just one morning, Easter the season is remembered as continuing for some six weeks afterwards.

The meaning of Easter the season is that Jesus may be gone, but not really. Following his death, he seems to hover around his surviving disciples, says our tradition, during which time he is said to appear in risen form to a variety of persons, in a variety of settings.

Why is that important? Because what transpires during these post-Crucifixion days is not as we may naively assume--namely, that Jesus dies, is buried, rather immediately is raised from death, makes some quick cameo appearances to a few select individuals, and then moves on, as the churchy jargon goes, to a seat at "the right hand of the Father." The naïve assumption is that the whole deal is wrapped up in a few days.

On the contrary, what we understand here is that, after being raised, Jesus does not rush off to heaven, but intentionally lingers here on earth. In fact, the tradition pertaining to the season of Easter is that Jesus persists in this series of personal contacts with his surviving followers for some forty days.

--You may vaguely remember a sermon that was previously preached back at the beginning of my tenure with you here at St. John's, where part of the morning's considerations had specifically to do with the number forty. It was observed then that, often in Scripture, numbers bear not a literal but a numerological significance, which most certainly is the case in the instance of forty.

Jesus' resurrection appearances go on, not for 25 or for 62, but for exactly 40, days. Forty. Where have we heard that number before? Well, it turns out, lots of places.

- For 40 days and 40 nights, the rains continue that create the Great Flood which Noah and family survive, thanks to the ark (Genesis 7.12);
- For 40 days and 40 nights, Moses remains on Mount Sinai, covered by the cloud, in communion with God (Exodus 24.18); there is also a subsequent visit on Sinai--a stay, of course, of 40 days and 40 nights--during which time Moses neither eats nor drinks, and after which he receives the tablets on which are etched the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34.28);

- For 40 days and 40 nights, Elijah makes his way to Horeb, the sacred mountain, arriving at a cave, where the word of the Lord comes to him (1Kings 19.8); and
- For 40 days and 40 nights, prior to the launching of his ministry, Jesus remains in the wilderness, fasting and tempted by Satan (Mark 1.13 & parallels).

Wherever the number forty occurs in Scripture, there is an associated symbolical meaning. Quite simply, forty means “a long time.”

- How long does it rain before the Great Flood? A long time.
- How long does Moses remain on Mount Sinai? A long time.
- How long does it take Elijah to arrive at the cave at Mount Horeb? A long time.
- How long is Jesus in the wilderness, famished and tempted? A long time.

So, says the tradition, between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension, he makes himself available in an assortment of manners to an assortment of people, for forty days. That’s a long time--a long time for him to be gone, but not really gone. That is an interval during which something remarkable occurs: The dead body of Jesus yields to a living body of Jesus--what in this morning’s reading we hear the apostle Paul referring to as “the Body of Christ” (12.27), a body of persons risen in the world to carry on Jesus’ message and ministry.

In short, resurrection is not something that is finished within the span of a few hours. In fact, suggests the eminent New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, “Easter Sunday lasted quite a few years.”<sup>1</sup> That is a mind-rattling thought.

--For Paul, the risen and ascended Jesus, though himself no longer personally on the scene, is replaced by another physical body of the foundling Church, which very much is on the scene, whose values would reflect Jesus’ values and whose mission would extend and complete Jesus’ mission. It is that into which young Mark has been baptized this morning.

During our Easter seasons, there is a moving ahead in a rich range of ways that, through those who comprise this Body, effectively enflesh and carry forward Jesus’ continuing influence and presence, where Jesus’ tolerance, passion for justice, and compassion, will become a new way of being in the world.

It’s true: After Easter, the Body of Christ rises. Please understand, I’m not talking about Jesus’ corpse, I’m talking about the Church.

Jesus is gone alright, but not really gone, either in that time or for all time, as long as there are individuals or congregations that take seriously the mind-set and the tasks to which they are called as followers. Every time that occurs, Jesus ceases to remain among “the dead.” Every time that occurs, Jesus again is among the living.

--Though now removed by a week from Easter the day, where we find ourselves is not a place where Easter can be said to be over.

Every person and each church must therefore continue to ask:

Are we genuinely part of the Body that, at Easter, has been raised?  
Or, judging by our energies or our actions, are we yet back there someplace in the  
dark, dank tomb, still waiting to be stirred alive?

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<sup>1</sup> John Dominic Crossan. Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography. New York: Harper  
Collins Publishers, 1995, p. 214.