

The Feast of the Resurrection (A)  
*Acts 10.34-43/Colossians 3.1-4/Matthew 28.1-10*  
St. Paul's Church, Halifax  
23 March 2008

The Great Interruption

~Paul H. Friesen~

You might know that Easter is very early this year, as early as it has been since 1913, before the First War. And it won't be this early again, we are told, till late in the twenty-third century. And it's all because today is the first Sunday after the first full moon after the Spring equinox.

You have *heard* that Spring has come, that the days are now getting longer. And perhaps you saw that lovely moon last night. And maybe you are hoping for nothing but sunshine today. Well, that's how we figure out the constantly changing date for Easter every year—that's how it has been done for centuries.

Now, doesn't this just underline that Easter *isn't* a particularly *Christian* celebration—that its all about the simple changing of the seasons, and the phases of the moon experienced by all, about new birth—about crocuses pushing their way through snow, and bunnies being born, and chicks hatching, and Spring wardrobes?

Well, the answer is both 'yes' and 'no'. Yes—we are celebrating Easter in North America at the same time everyone is enjoying the glories of spring or is at least longing for winter to end. And the Christian confession of belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ fits rather nicely into all of this with its talk about 'new birth'. And there was an Easter egg hunt in your priest's home.

But no—our confession of faith can't really be *explained* by all this. The Gospel opens today with the words, 'as the first day of the week was dawning...'

Easter must fall on a *Sunday*, which we have called the Day of the Resurrection since that the first Christian Sunday. Every Sunday is for Christians the Day of the Resurrection—we would not gather together at all if we didn't live in the light of Jesus' destruction of the power of sin and death. We gathered that first Sunday and we have gathered all Sundays since, and we gather today because of the Resurrection.

And this is the Sunday of all Sundays. Whatever weather comes our way on Easter morning (and huddled above the Halifax harbour we can never know), we go ahead and celebrate Christ's resurrection.

Whoever we are, whatever has happened to us, however happy or sad we might be this morning, in spite of any mess we might be in the middle of right now, this Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection has arrived this year, as it arrives every year. God, our maker, has interrupted the cycle of the seasons and the details of our lives to speak of the resurrected Christ to us.

*Do you see the window down in the Chapel at your left? We might call it the Chapel of Matthew 28. It's a glimpse the great interruption that God has thrown the way of Jesus' disciples. It's not a sentimental scene.*

*You can still see the three crosses outside the city gates. The tomb is empty, but not everyone seems to have realized this.*

*And those who have realized it—as the gospel says—are showing a mixture of fear and shock. But they're not even the right people! As one of the ancient fathers of the church put it: 'The Apostles are preceded in ministry by women, who follow the men by gender...These women are bringing to the sepulchre the form and appearance of women.'<sup>1</sup>*

*If a decent Roman publicist had arranged it, the male disciples would be in a nice semi-circle around the empty tomb, with blissful faces and raised hands, all eyes fixed on the vision of a heavenly Christ. But that's not what we see in the window, and it's certainly not what we read in the Gospels. The Resurrection of Christ is a great interruption, and everyone felt the consequences—and in God's mercy, we will too.*

In fact, the biblical scenes of the resurrection in our four Gospels are four glimpses gathered from a collection of witnesses and stories, treasured by four early church communities, with unique realities. But they all point to the empty tomb and the risen Christ. And none of them round off all the rough edges of what happened.

In Matthew's Gospel, like the others, it's the women who show up. In Matthew's Gospel the spotlight finds two women in particular. There is the wealthy Mary Magdalene who through Jesus had moved out of a troubled mind ('possession by seven devils') as the Bible puts it. And there is the 'other Mary', the mother of the disciple James, it would seem.

I would like us to think about these 'two Marys' for a minute or two. But before we do, I want to remind you about yet another Mary—not the mother of Jesus, but the sister of Lazarus and Martha, Jesus' friends.

In the *Gospel according to St. John* there is a story about Jesus and his disciples being hosted by the household of these three unmarried siblings,

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<sup>1</sup> It was Peter Chrysologus (400-450 a.d.), who was bishop of Ravenna during the days of the Empress Galla Placidia. See *Sermons 75.3 in Ancient Christian Commentaries on Scripture: Matthew 14-28*, ed. Manlio Simonetti (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), p.305.

a week before what we call Easter, at the beginning of what we call Holy Week.<sup>2</sup> We hear that in the middle of the dinner, Mary, Jesus' close friend gives attention, like a Roman servant to Jesus' feet. She anoints his feet with a costly perfume called *nard*. And she dries his feet with her hair. It is a passionate act.

Do you remember the reaction? The disciples can find nothing to say, except for Judas, who says: 'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred *denarii* and the money given to the poor?' The story teller reminds us that Judas was not concerned about the poor at all, but controlled the communal purse to which he helped himself. It was all about Judas, not about the poor.

*Three hundred denarii!* One *denarius* was the minimum daily wage in ancient Israel, so 300 *denarii* was equivalent to ten months salary on minimum wage.

In Nova Scotia the current minimum wage is \$7.60 an hour. So 10 months salary, if one worked every day of the week—or 12 months with Sunday off—would give one of us today a little under \$13,400 ... before deductions. It is a pitiful amount to live on, but its an awful lot to pay for perfume.

I went to one of our department stores this week, to the least scent-free place I could find—you know the section with the square counters and rows of potions and lotions manned by intimidating women in bright white lab coats. And I asked a question they seemed to be ready for: *What's your most expensive perfume?*

At this kiosk, the crisp answer came back immediately: *All our bottles cost \$65.* (That was more than enough for me but not enough for his sermon.) So I asked: *Is there more expensive perfume?* The ladies in the white lab coats loosened up a bit (to my relief) when I confessed that I was interested in perfume for a sermon. They assured me that if I went to a French *parfumiere*, and bought the real thing, I could easily pay over \$1000 dollars, or thousands of dollars for a bottle.

Jesus said to Judas: 'Leave [Mary] alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.' Though we don't know if this Mary made it to the tomb, she was spiritually alert to the coming of Jesus' death, and she was prepared, with the costliest perfume and the costliest act of devotion.

And so also were 'the Marys' in Matthew's story. They 'went to see the tomb'—with out male support to the tomb of a convicted political rebel, guarded by soldiers. They brought themselves, and probably spices, as we read about this in the other gospels.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *John* 12.1-8. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

<sup>3</sup> Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 734-735.

Without their costly devotion they would not have met the empty tomb. Without their costly devotion they would not have been the first to meet the resurrected Christ. But their costly devotion was interrupted. It was interrupted first by the shaking of the earth, and then by the dazzling angels, and then by Jesus himself.

Jesus said to these faithful women, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers...They will see me.' The great interruption of Jesus' resurrection was to be shared, not kept as a private comfort, a lifestyle choice, a personal religious obligation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is for the whole world, for the cowardly disciples, for the devoted women, to be shared by everyone.

This morning we will make an interruption in the life of one little girl, who will be baptized. Her parents are offering her to the resurrected Jesus, who has promised to interrupt her life... with divine grace that is pure divine love, so long as she shall live, throughout all her years, in every situation.

And we will offer ourselves to the same Jesus Christ in that baptismal rite. We will offer our devotion as the women did at the Eucharist too. But we are asked to remember that whatever we do this week as Christians, we just might be interrupted by earthquakes, and dazzling light, and even the voice of Jesus.

We can't know exactly how we will be interrupted, and whether it will be difficult or not— but if we are worshippers of Christ, we will be interrupted and we might even be as afraid as those women, or even more terrified, like the absent disciples. It might be a dirty face on the street, or bad news from the doctor. But the resurrected Christ does not play with us. We are interrupted only to enter into the joy of the resurrection.

The Lord has risen. Alleluia! He has risen indeed! *Amen*