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Seeking to Have a Myth-Understanding

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I've been calling the talks I have been offering here for the last several weeks "Rethinking Resurrection." The questions I have tried to keep before us have been three:

1. How did the various stories of the resurrection of Jesus develop?
2. What did they mean to those who first told and heard them?
3. What relevance do they have for us as we seek to be and become more loving and freer human beings?

I will continue down this path both today and next week and that will end this current series. After that I am taking a three week hiatus as Sherry and I will be going on the last part of the Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage route.

(Slides that illustrate this trip can be found on the Ordinary Life website.)

A few years ago we did the first part of one of the many routes of this very famous pilgrimage. We began at Mont Saint-Michel and went to Bordeaux. The art and architecture we saw along the way was incredible and the guides we had were, I think, among the best I have ever been exposed to.

We were guided on that trip by Peter Sills, a man some of you will remember. He was the Kerley Endowment first lecturer and is very knowledgeable about pilgrimages. This will be his twenty-fifth one to lead.

It is a small group - probably under thirty. We will be well represented because four couples from St. Paul's are going. This time we start in Lyon, France. Though the official tour group stops at the border of Spain, Sherry and I and another couple are going on all the way to Santiago which is allegedly where the body of James, the brother of Jesus, was carried by boat from Jerusalem.

There is a movie about the pilgrimage. It is "The Way" starring Martin Sheen and Emilio Estivates. If you are interested, there is a wonderful book full art beautiful photographs and helpful text about the pilgrimage.

As I said, we had excellent guides. As they would point out and explain things to us about the art and architecture, they would frequently stop and ask if anyone had any questions. Almost never did anyone's hand go up.

As a bonus or gift to the tour group, at the end of the tour Peter had arranged for us to tour a French winery. As we took the tour our guide would stop and ask, "Are there any questions?" This time nearly everyone's hand went into the air.

(Thanks to Wayne Herbert I have figured out a way to share this trip with those of you who want to join along. There is a blog page on the Ordinary Life website where I'll be posting pictures and text as we go along. At least that's the plan.)

Pilgrimages play an important role in all religious traditions. That is one of the things the labyrinth is about in St. Paul's courtyard. I sometimes refer to these talks as a Journey into Wholeness.

When we return I intend to begin a new series which, at the moment, has the working title "Embodying the Spirit of a Revolutionary Mystic."

I am fairly confident that these questions we have been dealing with will continue to pop up because a failure to deal with them openly and honestly has led to many of the world's woes. Especially is this true about the various theories that have grown up trying to make sense of out the crucifixion itself. Namely, that God was somehow responsible for the death of Jesus. Jesus was crucified as a result of his own behavior. His execution was a logical extension of his decision to confront the powers of his day. If God can behave in a violent way, so can we we. This is a matter we will take up more completely later and it is one of the reasons it is so important to be very clear about the question: what is the character of your God?

Let's start here:

Understanding and being understood are among the most important skills and experiences we can have.

The collapse of relationships, from the most intimate to those of global proportions frequently lies at the feet of a failure to understand one another.

Understanding is a skill. It is a skill that most people assume they are fairly good at but the evidence is fairly clear that many people are not. I can tell you as a person who has spent decades being a personal counselor that the biggest relational complaint that people bring to a therapist is the one that goes: "my partner doesn't understand me." Actually, the way it is more often than not put is, "We just don't communicate." That's not true, of course. It is impossible for any behavior in the presence of another

person not to communicate something. What is really meant is, "We don't talk."

Talking and knowing how to talk is a skill. I am convinced that our increased speed of life and the illusion that we can multi-task rob us of the experience of really listening to each other and, thereby, understanding each other.

There are other barriers as well:

We assume we know what the other person means.

We direct and correct others, especially our children, when what is more helpful is to explore.

We expect things from people we are not clear about and then are disappointed and/or critical when we don't get what we want.

In short, what is frequently communicated in even our most intimate relationships is a lack of respect.

We don't do this because we are bad people. We do it in an effort to be expedient. We put being effective to the side.

Being understood is an experience. It is one we all hunger for in life. One of the things someone in love will say about their partner is, "He gets me." Or, "She understands me."

Some people pepper their conversations with us by inserting the phrase, "Know what I mean?" Or, "Understand?" Usually we agree when, in fact, we may not at all.

We want to avoid misunderstanding and being misunderstood.

As we go further into the territory of attempting to understand what these stories meant to those who created them, we need another level of understanding altogether. We need to be open to developing the skill of receiving truth that goes beyond facts and information. That's why I have given this talk the title, "Seeking to Have a Myth-Understanding."

Though we want to avoid having misunderstandings, when it comes to where we are headed - that is, embodying the spirit of a revolutionary mystic, we must learn to receive truth at the level of myth.

We are conditioned in post-enlightenment Western culture to think of myth as something that is not true, not real. So we become trapped in logic and facts. As I hope to point out in a moment, the stories told about the experiences the early followers of Jesus had after his execution competed for attention in the Greek world where myth abounded.

It is clear, if you read the Gospel accounts that we have, that certain facts were available to those who composed those stories but each creator was very creative in how they tell their version of the story. They pick and choose the elements they want and all of them tell the story differently. Each of them has a different agenda and they use the "facts" available to them to serve that agenda.

I got a great line from Sister Corita Kent back in the 60's. She said, "To understand is to stand under which is to look up to, which is a good way to understand."

Having said all of that, let's go back with what I believe is some essential knowledge and information.

The first things written about Jesus and early Christianity were not Matthew, Mark, Luke and John but the letters of Paul. I think it would be helpful if people read what we call the "books" of the Christian Scriptures in the order in which the story evolved. I know the word "evolution" is not popular among many religious people but the fact is that the story developed and grew over a period of time.

Again, because of our Western mindset, we likely think of progress as improvement. Later, however, does not always mean better. It is clear that some of the later documents domesticate the radical teachings of Jesus.

What taking a chronological approach to the writings we have does provide us with is a window into what might be called "the early Christian movement." The fact is that there were vibrant communities of believers spread throughout the Roman Empire before there were any gospels written. The Gospels were not the source of early Christianity but its product.

Early understandings of Jesus and his significance developed over time. Matthew and Luke used Mark as their source and they changed it.

Further, the writers of these early documents were not writing as we think of books being written today. Books today are written for a more-or-less general audience. There was a largely illiterate world and certainly a pre-print world. They wrote to a specific group of people for a specific purpose. They were not written to us or with us in mind.

It is so important that we take the context in which these stories developed into consideration. The context is Jewish and Roman Empire. There were different ways of being Jewish then and there were certainly different ways of interpreting Jesus.

The urgent issues these early followers struggled with, as Jews, was: when and how would God's promises be fulfilled? Any initial understanding of resurrection must be understood in light of how this question would be answered in that time by those people.

Let summarize briefly some of the things I've said in more elaborate ways in the past about the Roman Empire. It was a politically oppressive world for the majority of people who lived in it. It violent and this violence was legitimized by religious claims. Caesar was god and tolerated no competition.

After the execution of Jesus and until the gospels were written a tradition developed among those who had been transformed by their following of him. A complete story didn't develop over night. Jesus wasn't executed, three days later popped out of the ground, hung around for a period of time, zipped off into the skies and, then, Mark, sat down and wrote a news report about it.

The evolving and developing story of and about Jesus was a communal process and it was based very much on what these people had observed about and learned from Jesus himself.

Jesus consistently ignored or even denied the exclusionary and punitive texts in his own Jewish Scripture in favor of passages that emphasized inclusion, mercy and honesty. As my teacher has put it, "He had a deeper and wider eye that knew what passages were creating a highway for God and which passages were

merely cultural, self-serving and legalistic additions. When (people who call themselves) Christians pretend that every line in the Bible is of equal importance and inspiration, they are being very unlike Jesus." (Richard Rohr)

Current American Christian Fundamentalism is captured at a very primitive or early cognitive and spiritual level of development. This is reflected in, among other things, the insistence on the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus and the historical reality of the miracles he performed. I am convinced that when the early community, under the influence of Paul, began to emphasize resurrection, they were talking about their experience of the direct access to Sacred Mystery that Jesus demonstrated to them in his very person while with them.

(Here viewing the presentation slides will help make sense of this paragraph.)

You would likely never have heard of this man if it had not been for this woman. This is Reza Aslan a biblical scholar and historian. This is Lauren Green the "religion" reporter for Fox News who interviewed him in perhaps the most embarrassing interview in recent memory.

(Here is a link to that interview <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/07/30/lauren-green-the-woman-behind-fox-news-reza-aslan-interview-debacle.html>)

Aslan is a Muslim who has written a historical account of Jesus. Green, who I am sure is being prompted through an earpiece by her producers, keeps asking how it is possible that a Muslim could possibly write a

history of Jesus - as if only a Christian could do such a thing.

Green begins her interview by saying, "I want to be clear, you are a Muslim. So why did you write a book about the founder of Christianity?"

Aslan explained, in patient yet annoyed terms, that yes, he is a Muslim, but he is also a scholar of religion, someone who has four degrees in the field and is fluent in biblical Greek, someone who has approached the life of Jesus as a scholar.

"But it still begs the question," Green interrupted. "Why would you be interested in the founder of Christianity?" It gets worse. Watch it for yourself.

Aslan is a biblical scholar whose interest is primarily historical. So he interprets the statements about resurrection in the Christian writings from that perspective. They were theological reflections and interpretations made decades after the death of Jesus and they were made in a world where there were many competing ideas about religion.

After the death of Jesus, his followers faced a tremendous test of faith. The Kingdom they thought he would usher in didn't come. The meek and the poor did not, in fact, change places with the rich and powerful. The Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland was not overthrown. There was nothing left for them to do but to abandon their cause and go back to their jobs - whatever those might be.

Then something extraordinary happened. I'm going to quote Aslan at length here:

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What that something was is impossible to know. Jesus' resurrection is an exceedingly difficult topic for the historian to discuss, not least because it falls beyond the scope of any examination of the historical Jesus. Obviously, the notion of a man dying a gruesome death and returning to life three days later defies all logic, reason, and sense. One could simply stop the argument there, dismiss the resurrection as a lie, and declare belief in the risen Jesus to be the product of a deludable mind.

However, there is this nagging fact to consider: one after another of those who claimed to have witnessed the risen Jesus went to their own gruesome deaths refusing to recant their testimony. That is not, in itself, unusual. Many zealous Jews died horribly for refusing to deny their beliefs. But these first followers of Jesus were not being asked to reject matters of faith based on events that took place centuries, if not millennia, before. They were being asked to deny something they themselves personally, directly encountered. . . .

They were beaten, whipped, stoned, and crucified, yet they would not cease proclaiming the risen Jesus. And it worked! Perhaps the most obvious reason not to dismiss the disciples' resurrection experiences out of hand is that, among all the other failed messiahs who came before and after him, Jesus alone is still called messiah. It was precisely the fervor with which the followers of Jesus believed in his resurrection that transformed this tiny Jewish sect into the largest religion in the world.

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I recommend this work to you. Next Sunday, when we talk about hope, I'll have more to say on the development of

the resurrection narratives in the early Christian documents.

One more piece at the knowledge level. You notice that I refer to the writings we have in what is called "The New Testament" as "documents" and not "books." We do not commonly refer to a writing that is no longer than ten, twenty or even fifty pages as a "book." We might call it a booklet. In our understanding of the word "book" none of the writings in the New Testament is a "book." The longest of Paul's writings is only around fifteen pages.

Another reason not to refer to these writings as books is that a book is usually written for people the author does not know. None of the writings in the New Testament fall into this category. They were not "published" in the sense that we think of a book being published.

The documents were written within a community of believers for a community of believers and not for a general reading audience.

Further, we cannot understand how the early stories about resurrection were created if we are unaware of the context. Paul, as we shall see more next week, never knew Jesus. Yet, he became the first to stress the importance of resurrection. Later on the narratives of Jesus' life would be created in the context of a non-Jewish and Greek world. Every time somebody from that world would respond to the story of Jesus - and they had their own gods who were the products of divine/human births and who had "risen" from the dead - the narrative would be shaped to respond to that.

The birth narratives, the last week narrative and the resurrection narratives are parables or myths that seek

to stress the importance of and reality of the transformation the early followers had experienced in their own lives. If someone had said, "Someone stole the body." a story was told about there being two guards at the tomb so that couldn't have happened. Again, and I know fundamentalist would strongly disagree with this, but these stories are parables. To take them literally is to misunderstand them and rob them of their true power. Our work is to have a mythic understanding of them.

Our senior minister captured one aspect of this last week in his sermon when he quoted Clarence Jordan, the founder of the movement that would eventually become Habitat for Humanity, as saying:

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The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that Jesus lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.

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The people in the time of Jesus had time to develop a much deeper and richer interior life than our modern, fast-paced time allows.

I'm not in any way discounting the wonderful advances of the time in which we live. The fact is, however, that the religion of our culture is consumerism. The business of business is everywhere. It is inescapable. The ranting of the sellers and the clamoring of the buyers never stops. So we have less and less time for our friends or our families. No time to think or

reflect. All of this goes on while our souls drown like a cat in a well.

I overheard a guy in an elevator the other day complaining about his schedule. He ended his litany by saying, "Who has time to do anything any more?"

It is only when we dare stop and take the time to look within to our essential essence that we find the foundation that can really help. The culture in which you and I live is not only a violent one but it is more and more externalized. When people live in a culture they inevitably absorb its essence. When we absorb violence and externalization, we end up with no ideas, no strength, nothing that might enable us to deal with our restlessness and splitness.

We live in a culture that tries to convince us that we can avoid the givens of life whereas the great prophets and spiritual teachers of all ages have taught that our happiness is dependent on embracing them. They have modeled how to do this.

One example of this is how these early Jesus followers dealt with his death. Among other things, they lived, as he taught and modeled, with compassion. They said, as did he, that our salvation lay in seeing the sacredness in every single human being and developing a willingness to take care of the more vulnerable members of society. This is the test of authentic piety and spirituality and religion.

I believe that we human beings are hard wired for the sacred. But we are not hard wired for religion. Religion is like cooking. Some of it can be disgusting. Bad religion is when we suffocate the sacred by dogma, by our humanly constructed rules, by the arrogant

idolatry of projecting our values and political policies onto the Sacred.

Our mothers and fathers in the faith - and by "in the faith" I mean those spiritual ancestors of ours who were not affected by the kind of technological culture that wraps up our globe today, were very unlike us in their way of thinking and acquiring knowledge. They had two ways of experiencing and expressing the Sacred.

These two ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge are called by scholars "mythos" and "logos." Both were regarded as essential. Each was used to "get at" the truth. Each had its own area of competence.

"Mythos" was regarded as primary; it was concerned with what was thought to be timeless and constant in our existence. Myth looked back to the origins of life, to the foundations of culture, and to the deepest levels of the human mind. Myth was not concerned with practical matters, but with meaning. Isn't it true that meaning is what we all seek?

The mythos of a society provided people with a context that made sense of their lives. It directed people's attention to the eternal and universal. Mythos is also deeply rooted in the unconscious, in the collective unconscious. When people told stories about heroes who descended into the underworld and fought with monsters, they were bringing to light that which is unconscious in us all.

None of this is accessible to purely rational investigation but it has a profound effect on our experience and behavior. All of us can be captured by those deep forces from the unconscious that cause us to live lives as either heroes or to be very self-destructive.

This is why having a myth-understanding of who we are and what we are called to do is so important.

Myths require communities and rituals to keep them active and alive.

"Logos" was equally important. "Logos" was the rational, pragmatic and scientific thought that allowed people to function well in the world. We may have lost the mythic in our time but we have made logos the basis of our society. In order for this way of thinking to work, it must be accurate. It must relate to life as it is.

In the time before fundamentalism, in that world, myth and logic, went hand in hand. Each was indispensable. They were distinct but only as distinct as the "head" and "tail" side of a coin. It was impossible to have one without the other. Each had a separate job to do. Each had its limitations. Logic can't deal with human pain and sorrow. It can't tell us about the ultimate value of life. That was the business of myth.

However, by the 18th century, people of Europe and then America had achieved such astounding success in science and technology, that we began to think that logic was the only way to truth. Myth began to be discounted as false and superstitious.

If you want to scare the hell out of a fundamentalist, just use the word "myth." Fundamentalists try to turn myth into fact. This only leads to more problems.

It seems to me that one of the things we must do, is reintroduce the mythic back into our lives. Not just by knowing it or knowing about it. That would be like only looking at a piece of music and thinking we have heard

it. We must learn to ritualize meaningful myths back into our lives if we are to confront the errors of fundamentalism and, I believe, save not only our lives but our selves, our souls.

If we can achieve this myth-understanding, we can follow the radical mystic Jesus and be led out of limits, out of prejudices, out of brokenness and out of self-centeredness. We are called into life, into love, into wholeness and into Sacred Mystery.

No matter where you go this week, no matter what happens, remember this; you carry Sacred cargo. So, watch your step.