

Easter: April 11/12, 2009

One Solitary Life

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant. He grew up in another village, where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30. Then, for three years, he was an itinerant preacher.” So begins James Allen Francis’ poem “One Solitary Life.” An inauspicious start to an inauspicious life by worldly standards. Humble beginnings and a humble home. He worked with his hands until he took to the road. He taught people respect for God and respect for one another. His message was inspiring. But he did not mobilize his followers into a movement. No commerce. No influence brokering. Not even any personal considerations for himself or his disciples. One solitary life.

Today we gather to celebrate the pivotal event in the life of Christ and the foundation for hope of the Christian faith. *Jesus Christ is risen today!* Christians *around the world* gather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Including those at Saints Peter and Paul Church in Baghdad, who hold Easter services today for the first time in two years as Iraqi Christians return to homes they had deserted because of violence. The resurrection of Jesus is the reason that his inauspicious background and his solitary life are known after two millennia. People don’t come back from the grave. People stay dead. But this One was different. He did not stay dead. There are eye witnesses—many of them—who attest to the resurrection. But it was so long ago. Are they trustworthy? Or was it just wishful thinking? I need to know. It’s a matter of life and death. And when it comes to my life, you have my attention, preacher. This much I know. One day I will die. What lies beyond the grave? And what connection does that have with what we celebrate today?

“He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a home. He didn’t go to college. He never lived in a big city. He never traveled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He did none of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but himself.” What would you do if you wanted to start a movement or, at least, to leave a legacy. Writing a book is always a good start. There is credibility in having your name in print. Public office is the only way I know to get your face on currency or your likeness carved in stone. At the least get a college education or learn a trade so that you can support yourself and maybe, just maybe, become successful. With even a little success you can lift your vision a bit and consider a train trip to Chicago, a Caribbean cruise, or a week in Cancun. Jesus never went that far. About the furthest was to Tyre where he healed the Canaanite woman’s daughter, about 100 miles as the crow flies from Jerusalem. About the same distance as St. Louis to Springfield, Illinois. Jesus had such a limited background, such a narrow experience, little worldly exposure. “He had no credentials *but himself.*” What were those credentials that could so change common followers into fearless apostles, peasant Jews into New Testament Christians, and a pagan Roman Empire into a Christian state?

“He was only 33 when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his garments, the only property he had on earth. When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave, through the pity of a friend.” Not much of an obituary. It probably would not even make the obit page in the Post Dispatch. He made the wrong enemies and he paid the price. The flash of notoriety from his insightful teaching and stirring actions came crashing down on a Friday we call Good. By the end of that day it was all over but the shouting. And what shouting there was, was a quiet clucking that he

had reached too far, that he stirred up a hornet's nest, that his was, in the end, a pathetic life. A borrowed grave, a security guard for good measure, and the matter was settled. *Or so it seemed.*

We stand in time twenty centuries removed from these events. It seems so remote. Why, there is no one here today who was alive during the Civil War, who remembers the turn of the 20th century, or even the first World War. How can events 20 times more remote than these still have an impact in our world, in this country, on my life? As a friend mentioned to me recently, *how can I know that the events in Jesus' life are true, that my faith is not simply a pipe dream and blind faith?* St. Paul gives us the definitive answer. That answer comes in two parts.

First, it is to know the story of Jesus, what he calls "the gospel I preached to you." He begins, *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.* "All we, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way," writes the prophet Isaiah. This is our sad lot and our great need. Consumed in self-interest, pursuing personal pleasure, oblivious to the presence of God and the needs of others. We have "gone astray". But Isaiah continues: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." My iniquity. Your iniquity. We know it only too well. Jesus shouldered it all. Took it to the cross. And for six agonizing hours he writhed under the judgment of our sin. When he died, the debt was paid and the scales of justice were satisfied. Paul continues his testimony: *He was buried.* In a borrowed tomb, which Matthew says belonged to a disciple of Jesus, one Joseph of Arimathea. It was a new tomb cut out of the rock. And a big stone was rolled in front of the entrance. No one has a problem with the account thus far. Everyone dies. Some do not die a peaceful death. But death touches everyone. It will touch all gathered in this assembly. St. Paul continues the account, and oh, what a continuation it is!: *He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* Jesus had predicted as much when he taught the disciples, "that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things, that he must be killed, *and on the third day be raised to life.*" It was the sign of Jonah, the testimony of David, the prophesy of Isaiah. And it is the turning point of history. *He was raised on the third day.* These are the facts and they are the first half of Paul's answer to the question, "How can I know, that I might believe?"

The second half of Paul's answer is the validation of the facts and the basis for our confidence. In a word, there are eye witnesses to the resurrection. Peter, the Twelve, more than 500, James, all the apostles, and even to Paul. More than enough, much more, than is necessary to establish truth in any court of law. Not two or three, *More than 500!* The resurrection is truth. Let the court of history judge the truthfulness of the account. That a solitary life with no credentials but himself, attended to by a group of followers with little resources and no political clout, in a backwater country under the occupation of the mighty Roman Empire; that this solitary life would change the course of history, would reorder kingdoms and nations, would influence the most inspired music and literature this world will ever know. And twenty centuries later would speak to your heart today. The resurrected Jesus speaks today to the deep needs of your soul. Of the love of God and the forgiveness of your sins. Of his presence and purpose for your life here and now. Of a future time and another place when he will restore all things and set all things right. To believe this is not blind faith. And while the *Holy Spirit* must convict us of its truthfulness, let the record show that the testimony of Jesus is rooted in history and is the account of a God who did not remain far off but who has come near by becoming one of us.

"Twenty centuries have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race. I am well within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned—*put together*—have not affected the life of man on this earth as much as that one, solitary life." Amen.