

## **THE POST-EASTER JESUS**

**An Easter sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan  
University Public Worship  
Stanford Memorial Church  
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Happy Easter, rain or not! On Easter we don't gather "to close the show with the tune, 'Thanks for the memory,' but rather to reopen the show, because 'Jesus Christ is risen today' ... The Easter message says that all the tenderness and strength which on Good Friday we saw scourged, buffeted, stretched out on a cross – all that beauty and goodness is again alive and with us now, not as a memory that inevitably fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of us, if only we would recognize it... But there's nothing sentimental about Easter. Easter represents a demand as well as a promise, a demand not that we sympathize with the crucified Christ, but that we pledge our loyalty to the risen one."<sup>i</sup>

Those are the words of my college chaplain, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Jr. He died on Wednesday at the age of 81. He preached my installation sermon here in Memorial Church five years ago, and I'm fortunate to have been able to see him a number of times since. He preached from this pulpit more than once, though, going back to the days of deans Davie Napier and Robert McAfee Brown in the 1960's and 70's. He was a giant in American religion for decades – the university chaplain of record, as far as I'm concerned, starting with his days at Williams College and on through Yale University for almost two decades. Civil rights and anti-war activist, he brought the biblical tradition alive and challenged the principalities and powers like a Hebrew prophet, if not

like Jesus himself. I want to dedicate my sermon today to the loving memory of Bill Coffin.

In an Easter sermon entitled “Like Him We Rise,” Coffin’s central point was that Easter has to do with “the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power...Love is stronger than death.”<sup>ii</sup> Jesus came with a world-shattering message of love that didn’t die on the cross. His disciples became ten times the people they were after Easter than before. Peter denied Jesus three times at the end of Jesus’ life, but then went on to become the rock upon which the Christian Church was built – a religious institution which came to teach clearly that “God is love.”<sup>iii</sup> Other apostles who scurried away from Jerusalem after Jesus’ crucifixion -- back up toward the northern Galilee region -- were turned around and emboldened by the risen Christ’s appearance to them and his instructions to go out and “make disciples of all nations.”<sup>iv</sup> The tragedy of Judas, Coffin preached, is that he killed himself before Christ’s resurrection, and therefore he could never be forgiven by the risen Christ and commissioned to go forth to preach the gospel of love with the other disciples.<sup>v</sup>

Of course, there’s been a lot of excitement over the last couple of weeks about re-finding the Gospel of Judas, which had been denounced as heretical by the church father Irenaeus in the year 180 and later ordered destroyed. It claims that Judas was Jesus’ only true disciple, to whom he imparted secret knowledge, and whom Jesus specifically asked to turn him into the Romans in order to free his spirit from its prison of the flesh. Unfortunately, it doesn’t look as if we’ll learn anything from the Gospel of Judas either about the historical Judas or about the historical Jesus, though, because this gospel only tells us what a mystical sect of Gnostics, writing a hundred years after his death, were

doing with the Jesus story in relation to their own particular theory of a radical antagonism between flesh and spirit.<sup>vi</sup>

Speaking of the historical Jesus, let me say a few things to describe the difference between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus. Most of what I say here is informed by the work of Oregon State University biblical scholar Marcus Borg, who preached from this pulpit just a year ago this month. It seems unlikely from the biblical text that the historical Jesus, before his death and resurrection, thought he was identical to God.<sup>vii</sup> For example, he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before he was crucified, asking, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup [or this task of being crucified] from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.”<sup>viii</sup> Clearly, Jesus thinks of himself as different from God, asking God to save him from death, but ultimately recognizing that it’s God’s will, and not his own, which will prevail. Later on the cross he asks, as human to God, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>ix</sup> Earlier in his life he’d responded to someone who’d called him “Good Teacher” with these words, distinguishing himself from God: “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”<sup>x</sup>

The post-Easter Jesus, once humanly dead but now resurrected and alive, appears to Mary Magdalene, as we heard in this morning’s gospel lesson.<sup>xi</sup> Eventually he appears to all of his disciples,<sup>xii</sup> and even to a crowd of five hundred, as Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians.<sup>xiii</sup> He’s a spiritual being who can be among his disciples without being recognized,<sup>xiv</sup> appear and disappear at will,<sup>xv</sup> and pass through closed and locked doors.<sup>xvi</sup> Obviously this is not a resuscitated human being with a normal earthly body, and it may well have been that his appearances were what today we would call

visions.<sup>xvii</sup> Yet, there's no doubt that it was the fervent belief that Jesus had been resurrected and lived again, in some form, that caused Christianity to start spreading like wild fire around the ancient Mid East, rather than sputtering out as a small apocalyptic movement like the Essenes or the Dead Sea scrolls community or many other similar groups that existed within Judaism at the time of Jesus.<sup>xviii</sup>

And the post-Easter Jesus has continued to appear to people throughout history, right up to the present day. The apostle Paul, who never met the pre-Easter Jesus, experienced him on the road to Damascus about two years after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection.<sup>xix</sup> There was a blinding light, he fell to the ground, and then he heard a voice calling to him, saying "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" When he asked whose voice this was, the answer came back, "I am Jesus." This was Paul's conversion event from "breathing threats and murder" against Jesus' disciples, to becoming one of them himself, eventually changing his name from Saul to Paul.<sup>xx</sup>

Before Stephen was stoned to death as the first Christian martyr to his faith, we learn from the book of Acts that he had a vision of the heavens opening and seeing Jesus standing at the right hand of God.<sup>xxi</sup> Pope Gregory the First in the sixth century explained that Jesus once appeared after the pope was feeding beggars, saying "Ordinarily, you receive me in the poor that assemble at your board, but today you received Me personally." Saint Francis of Assisi reported in the thirteenth century that the risen Christ appeared to him twice. Later, mystics Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila described numerous experiences of Jesus in their presence. In the nineteenth century, William Booth explained that he founded the Salvation Army after he saw Jesus, who rebuked him for his "nominal, useless, lazy, professing Christian life."<sup>xxii</sup> William

Sloane Coffin stated that he believed “passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence.”<sup>xxiii</sup>

This isn't to say that it's a requirement for any of us to have had a direct, personal experience of the post-Easter Jesus to be good, committed Christians. Yet, we're part of a religious tradition, as Christians, where these appearances of the risen Christ have been common and affirmed by others in the community. As Marcus Borg has put it, “the core meaning of Easter is that Jesus continued to be experienced after his death, but in a radically new way: as a spiritual and divine reality.”<sup>xxiv</sup> Expanding on this, Borg explains that therefore “It's not just that his memory lived on or that his spirit lived on, as we sometimes speak of the spirit of Lincoln living on. Rather, he was and is experienced as a figure of the present. In short, Jesus lives.”<sup>xxv</sup>

Let's go back to the historical or pre-Easter Jesus for a moment, though. There seems to be little doubt from the biblical record that he himself had frequent and vivid experiences of God. In this, he was similar to others in the Jewish tradition for whom the sacred was an experiential reality, like Moses and the prophets.<sup>xxvi</sup> Although there's reason to think that he personally would have been appalled by the suggestion that he himself was divine, many saw him during his lifetime as one who had experiences of the divine, as one anointed by God to bring a special message to others, as one in whom the Spirit of God was at work – especially in his healing and his teaching. But there's also biblical evidence that he got tired, had bad days, and was experienced more than once as quite ordinary.<sup>xxvii</sup> Nonetheless, there's a certain amount of continuity between him as a Jewish mystic, religious ecstatic or “Spirit person” during his lifetime, and the fully divine post-Easter Jesus of subsequent Christian experience.<sup>xxviii</sup> In both cases, Jesus'

disclosing of God's love is absolutely central. When asked during his lifetime what the greatest commandment is, Jesus responded: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...[and] you shall love your neighbor as yourself."<sup>xxxix</sup> The pre-Easter Jesus was also the one who defied all conventions of his day to spend time with tax collectors, prostitutes, adulterers, and those from other religious traditions like Samaritans. He called on his followers to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, welcome the stranger, and visit the imprisoned.<sup>xxx</sup> He considered himself anointed by God to bring good news to the poor and the oppressed.<sup>xxxi</sup> Then, the post-Easter Jesus reaffirmed the pre-Easter's lifetime teachings and sent his disciples to spread them throughout the world.<sup>xxxii</sup>

As William Sloane Coffin has put it, to pledge loyalty to the risen Christ is to end all loyalties to people and institutions that crucify. "I don't see how you can proclaim allegiance to the Risen Lord," Coffin declares, "and then allow life once again to lull you to sleep, to smother you in convention, to choke you with success. It seems to me that the burden of proof is with those who think they can combine loyalty to the Risen Christ with continuing the arms race; or with those who think that we Americans have the right to decide who lives, dies, and rules in other countries; or with those who think that the Risen Lord would not argue with an economic system that clearly reverses the priorities of Mary's Magnificat – filling the rich with good things and sending the poor away empty."<sup>xxxiii</sup>

So often it looks as if we still live in a Good Friday world of the pre-Easter Jesus as he's being crucified: "Politicians seek to minimize their responsibilities, washing their hands...Like Peter, most of us disciples follow [Jesus]...halfway, but not the other half.

As for the majority of citizens, are they not like the crowd that gathered on Calgary, not to cheer a miscarriage of justice, but also not to protest it? Failing to realize that compassion without confrontation is hopelessly sentimental,...people go home beating their breasts, preferring guilt to responsibility.”<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Coffin pushes us toward what he calls the light of Easter: “Through the thick darkness covering the nations, we can dimly discern a ‘Yes, but’ kind of message. Yes, fear and self-righteousness, indifference and sentimentality kill; but love never dies, not with God, and not even with us... Christ is risen *pro nobis*, for us, to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron up our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from life to something more than life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

So Happy Easter to each and every one of you. May love come again. May love live again. May Christ’s warm touch call us back to life again.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Amen.

## NOTES

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- <sup>i</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 70-71, 73.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70, 72.
- <sup>iii</sup> See Matthew 16:18 and I John 4:7.
- <sup>iv</sup> Matthew 28:19.
- <sup>v</sup> Coffin, *Living the Truth*, p. 72.
- <sup>vi</sup> David Gates, "Sealed with a Kiss," *Newsweek* (April 17, 2006), pp. 48-49.
- <sup>vii</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 88.
- <sup>viii</sup> Luke 22:42. See also Matthew 26:39.
- <sup>ix</sup> Mark 15:34.
- <sup>x</sup> Mark 10:18.
- <sup>xi</sup> John 20:1-18.
- <sup>xii</sup> Matthew 28:16-17; Mark 16:14; Luke 24:36; John 20:19.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Paul 15:6.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Luke 24:16.
- <sup>xv</sup> Luke 24:31; 24:36-37.
- <sup>xvi</sup> John 20:19; 20:26.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Coffin, *Living the Truth*, p. 72; Marcus J. Borg, "The Truth of Easter," in Marcus J. Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), p. 135.
- <sup>xviii</sup> N.T. Wright, "The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection," in Borg and Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus*, p. 111; Huston Smith, *The World's Religions* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 330.
- <sup>xix</sup> Peter Calvocoressi, *Who's Who in the Bible* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 141.
- <sup>xx</sup> See Acts 9:1-22; 22:6-16; 26:12-18.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Acts 7:55-56.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Phillip H. Wiebe, *Visions of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 16-21.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Coffin, *Living the Truth*, p. 73.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), p. 93.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The Heart of Christianity* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), p. 54.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Borg, *The God We Never Knew*, pp. 89.
- <sup>xxvii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.
- <sup>xxviii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xxix</sup> Matthew 22: 22:36-40; see also Mark 12:28-31.
- <sup>xxx</sup> Matthew 25:31-46.
- <sup>xxxi</sup> Luke 4:18.
- <sup>xxxii</sup> Matthew 28:20.
- <sup>xxxiii</sup> Coffin, *Living the Truth*, p. 71.
- <sup>xxxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>xxxv</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- <sup>xxxvi</sup> John M. C. Crum, "Now the Green Blade Rises," *Oxford Book of Carols*, 1928.