

Easter Sermon by Christopher Epting

August 21, 2019

A number of us here at New Song are devotees of Father Richard Rohr, the Franciscan author and teacher on the spiritual life. He runs something called the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico and you can sign up for a daily e-mail reflection of his by going to their website – cac.org!

This group recently held an international conference in Albuquerque entitled “*The Universal Christ: Another Name for Everything!*” A bit of an overstatement perhaps! **But** over 2,000 people showed up in person and another 2800 or so of us from several continents joined the live stream over the course of four days. Lectures and presentations by Richard Rohr and others were interspersed with liturgies and times of contemplative prayer as well as opportunities (for those who were there in person) for small group interaction.

The overall message was that union of humanity and divinity that we Christians have seen in Jesus is but one shining example of a truth that has been present from the beginning of time and across all religions and none: Namely that every single created **Being** throughout all eternity and in every Universe is **in** God and that God is **in** everything! Rohr calls that part of the “Perennial Wisdom” – **that** which is simply **true**, and which has been experienced in many ways by many cultures and many religions – **perennial** wisdom!

When we Christians say that “the Word became Flesh” in Jesus, we are simply recognizing a **unique** example of the fact that Spirit and Matter have never been separate in the first place, and that we only experience things that way because of some pretty dualistic and body-denying theology that most of us grew up hearing from pulpits and in religious classrooms. Spirit is good; flesh is bad! We need to be “saved” from that!

What we need to be “saved” from is not so much “original sin” (often wrongly identified as sins of “the flesh!)) but from the blindness that keeps so many of us

from seeing the Oneness and the beauty of God's Creation everywhere. We need to be "saved" from that!

Another dimension of the universal nature of God's love and God's grace is what we are celebrating here on this Easter morning – the Resurrection! One of the other presenters at this conference was John Dominic Crossan who is a Roman Catholic biblical scholar and author of a number of books on the Historical Jesus.

Crossan's contribution to the concept of the Universal Christ was to point out that, while most of Jesus' life and ministry are described in some detail in the Gospels – the healings and miracles, events like the Transfiguration, the trial and execution of Jesus on the Cross, even experiences his followers had of him **after** the Resurrection such as Luke described in today's Gospel -- the actual **moment** of Resurrection is never described in the New Testament.

So it remained for **artists** to try and give us pictures of what it must have been like. Initially, icons and paintings only showed symbols of Jesus rising from the tomb – the Chi Rho symbol (which looks to us like an X and a p – the first two letters of "Christ" in Greek) or the familiar **IHS** abbreviation. Later, there were depictions of Jesus stepping out of the tomb, perhaps trailing his grave clothes behind him.

All those were depictions of an **individual** Resurrection – Jesus! The Eastern Orthodox Church soon developed an even richer way of showing the cosmic significance of the Resurrection by paintings and icons of what Crossan calls the **Universal** Resurrection. I have an example of one of those icons which I have placed on the Altar so you can take a look on your way up for Communion or after our liturgy today.

Icons like this show Jesus rising from the dead all right, but he is not alone. Instead he is grasping the hand of Adam and Eve and leading them – along with figures representing all of humanity out of death and Hades into New Life. The 17th century Anglican priest and poet George Herbert must have seen one of these icons when he wrote: "Sing his praise/ without delays/ Who takes (you) by the hand/ that (you) likewise with him (may) rise." Or, as a contemporary

Orthodox theologian puts it, “The Resurrection is not the resuscitation of a body; it is the beginning of the transformation of the world.” (Patriarch Athenagoras).

It’s the kind of thing our Lessons from Scripture were trying to hint at today: In our First Lesson, “Peter began to speak to Cornelius and the other Gentiles: ‘I truly understand that God shows **no partiality**, but **in every nation anyone** who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of **all!**’” (Acts 10:34)

And in our Epistle from the 1st Letter of Paul to the Corinthians: “But in fact Christ **has** been raised from the dead, the **first fruits** of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; **for as all die in Adam, so ALL will be made alive in Christ...**For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **The last enemy to be destroyed is death.**” (I Corinthians 15:19 passim)

These icons attempt to show all this symbolically. Jesus is bringing with him Adam and Eve, representing all of humanity; also David and Solomon and John the Baptist, representing the Jews. He’s leading out St. Paul and some others who had not even **died** at the time of the Resurrection. This shows the symbolic nature of the icon’s message. It was not intended to be literal, but symbolically true!

And the truth it is trying to convey, the truth the New Testament is trying to convey, the truth that **Easter** is trying to convey is that the promise of Eternal Life is not for a select few. Our Prayer Book Catechism says that when Christians hope for eternal life, we hope for “a new existence, in which we are united with **all the people of God**, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.” (BCP 862) That’s pretty dry theological language. The icon says it better! So do these lines from one of our hymns today...

Christ is alive! No longer bound to distant years in Palestine / He comes to claim the here and now and conquer **every** place and time.

Christ is alive! His Spirit burns through this and every future age/ ‘til **all creation** lives and learns... his joy, his justice, love, and praise. (1979 Hymnal #182)

Easter is **that** big, dear friends! Easter is **Universal!** And **THAT** calls for a celebration!