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Easter and the neverending story

John Dear S.J. | Apr. 10, 2012 On the Road to Peace

At an Easter service in Texas on Sunday, football star Tim Tebow called Easter "our Super Bowl." Well, sorry, Tim, but I think the resurrection of the nonviolent Jesus is beyond any football analogy. During my speaking tour about my new book *Lazarus, Come Forth!*, I've been talking about resurrection in terms of active nonviolence.

For me, it means death does not get the last word, that from now on, we do not cooperate with death and its analogies, that we are called to be people of loving nonviolence. Our task is to abolish poverty, war, executions, nuclear weapons and violence if we want to live in Christ's resurrection gift of peace. Going to the Super Bowl is easy compared to the Easter struggle for justice and disarmament.

This Easter, I found myself pondering Mark's account of the resurrection. His version -- the earliest and shortest of the four Gospel versions -- does not feature the risen Jesus. He never appears. Instead, a youth dressed in white -- the clothing of martyrs -- commands the women to tell the men to return to Galilee, where they will see the risen Jesus. They run away terrified.

In other words, the story takes us back to where we started, back to the Sea of Galilee, where we first heard the call to discipleship. Mark's Easter Sunday invites us to enter the Gospel story and make our own journey from our own Galilee to our own modern-day Jerusalem if we want to meet the risen Jesus and receive his gift of peace. There's no Super Bowl party. Mark says Jesus wants us to take up where he left off. If we ponder that invitation seriously, our response might be like the faithful women -- sheer terror.

Centuries after Mark wrote his original ending, scribes apparently added 10 more verses to tidy things up. But if we presume that Mark knew what he was doing, if we dare accept his original ending as it stands, we discover a whole new Easter Sunday invitation:

> Very early when the sun had risen on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. They were saying to one another, "Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb"? When they looked up they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. On entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, "Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you.' " Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16: 1-8)

In his groundbreaking study, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, Ched Myers suggests that the shorter ending was intentional, that the author wants the reader to step into the story and complete it by following Jesus within the context of our own lives. "The disciple/reader is being told that the narrative, which appeared to have ended, is beginning again. The story is circular!"

Myers continues:

> The full revelation of the Human One has resulted in neither triumphal victory for the community (as the disciples had hoped), nor the restored Davidic kingdom (as the rebels had hoped), nor tragic failure and defeat (as the reader had feared). It has resulted in nothing more and nothing less than the regeneration of the messianic mission. If we have eyes to "see" the advent of the Human One we will able to "see" Jesus still going before us. The "invitation" by Jesus, via the young man, to follow him to Galilee, is the ... last call to discipleship ... Is the disciple/reader also willing to undergo such a transformation? Here both the realism and genius of Mark are fully revealed, or the final narrative signal is fraught with ambiguity.

"Mark does not leave us with a happy ending," Myers writes:

> We do not entirely understand what "resurrection" means, but if we have understood the story, we should be "holding fast" to what we do know: that Jesus still goes before us, summoning us to the way of the cross. And that is the hardest ending of all: not tragedy, not victory, but an unending challenge to follow anew. Because that means we must respond ... For Mark, the resurrection is not an answer, but the final question. There is only one genuine "witness" to the risen Jesus: to follow in discipleship. Only in this way will the truth of the resurrection be preserved.

Myers' Mark summons us to honor the resurrection of Jesus by becoming authentic disciples and making Jesus' story our own story in our own imperial context.

> The "implied resurrection" at the end of Mark functions to legitimate the ongoing messianic practice of the community. At the same time, because it demands a readerly resolution, it subverts the possibility of a glorified Christology, which might render the community passive. The empty tomb means the story of biblical radicalism can continue in the living and dying of disciples in all ages. The resurrection represents the apocalyptic hope that the blood of the martyrs will be vindicated and the pain of the world healed, and confirms the call to historical insomnia.

As a way to understand the end of Mark's Gospel, Myers points to the German novelist Michael Ende's brilliant children's book, *The Neverending Story*. Written in the tradition of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis, this massive tale relays the story of an alienated young boy who finds himself alone overnight in a book store, where he begins reading a huge fantasy book about a life-and-death struggle between good and evil, only to find himself drawn deeper into it, until he realizes that the characters in the book want him to join their struggle! As he realizes that they are soliciting his help, his own name is mentioned, so he steps into the book, joins their struggle for goodness and justice, and is transformed in the process.

Myers writes:

> In similar fashion, Mark's narrative of discipleship can continue only if we realize that we are in fact characters in the very story we thought we were reading. Mark, like Ende's novel, puts the "future" of the narrative in the hands of the reader. And he can do so precisely because he believes that the story and its subject are not "dead past" but "living present." But how do we "jump into" the Gospel and make it our own? Mark's readerly crisis cannot be resolved through a mere leap of imagination, but only by "taking up the cross" and following. The new story is one in which we are no longer only readers but also actants. Our "script" thus becomes that of biblical radicalism.

How do we jump into the Gospel and make it our own? How do we follow the risen Jesus these days? What does discipleship to a crucified, risen, nonviolent savior mean for us in today's violent world?

Over the past few months, as I've traveled the country talking about resurrection. I've met hundreds of marvelous people who have witnessed to me something of this discipleship. I've met many wonderful, ordinary people who are entering the Jesus story in their own way and walking with him from their own

Galilee to their own Jerusalem. They know that this spiritual, political, human journey takes us way beyond electoral, or even, church politics.

I think of my friends Claudia and Laura in Seattle, former religious women struggling to continue as contemplative laywomen. They're like the faithful women in Mark, who must have struggled to live a post-Easter life. I think of the young couple in Flagstaff, Ariz., who brought their teenage son to hear me speak in hopes that it would change his mind from applying to join the Army. (It did.) I think of the police officer and professor of criminology in St. Louis who told me about his efforts to teach nonviolent methods in police precincts around the nation. I think of the archdiocesan woman in Atlanta in charge of promoting social justice, who is distributing beautiful brochures on Catholic social teaching in churches throughout the region. Or I think of the good people of L'Arche in Chicago who live with and serve the disabled. (After my talk, one of the core members, Jean, said in a loud voice, "You talk way too much!" We all laughed.)

I think of Concetta and her fellow activists in northern Illinois trying to stop the building of a new detention center for immigrants in Crete. Or of the Catholic Workers in Half Moon Bay, Calif., who try so hard to serve the disenfranchised farmworkers. Or of the amazing ecumenical community and retirement center in eastern Tennessee, which has more than 300 members. Most of them were activists throughout their lives. Several are former priests and nuns. They bring in speakers and support many causes of justice and peace. Instead of retiring, they continue to be a beacon of light and hope to many in Tennessee. Many Pax Christi people, Catholic Workers, Just Faith people and women religious struggle to do what they can in this reactionary, war-making climate. So many good people. From the perspective of Mark's Easter account, they look like they have entered the story, made it their own and bring the Gospel to life all over again.

"Everything that happens to Christ happens to us," Alan Jones writes in his book *Soul Making*.

> If we follow the life of Christ as set out in the Gospels, we find a wide range of possible experiences. There is a birth, and a growing up. He is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. He engages in an active ministry of teaching and healing. And he sets his face towards Jerusalem to suffer and endure a shameful death. He is raised on the third day and now reigns in glory and in the heart of his faithful people. So runs the story. And so for the believer there are Bethlehems, times of growing up, wildernesses, and bursts of compassionate activity. There are also Good Fridays and Easter Days. If we take as our maxim, "Everything that happens to Christ happens to us," the Christian life won't always take away our suffering and our hurt, but it will place them within the context of meaning and hope.
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> We are actors in a great drama. Some believers, for example, might enjoy an active and worthwhile ministry, while others struggle in the wilderness. Some might experience a great and terrible suffering, while others feel as if they have just been raised from the dead. Some are so exhausted that they feel they are as good as dead. They are waiting to be raised from the tomb. But it is all one drama. This basic rhythm is not confined to the individual believers. It shapes the believing community as well. This drama is also played out in some form in every human life. Christ is honored or despised, loved or reject, in every one.

This Easter Season, I hope we can reflect on how well we are choosing to enter the Gospel drama of the nonviolent Jesus, to make his story our own, to continue his work for justice, disarmament and peace, and to make the Gospel come alive again. As we do, I think, we discover anew the meaning of resurrection.

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John Dear will speak April 10 in Denver; April 11 in Cheyenne, Wyo.; April 12 in Casper, Wyo.; and April 17 and 18 in Minneapolis. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [1], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [3] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings* *[4]*; *Put Down Your Sword* *[5]* and *A Persistent Peace* *[6]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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