

## "Tradition & Intellect at the Intersection of Faith?"

Matthew 28:1-10

Easter Sunday: April 24, 2011

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The other day an elder walked into my office to tell me his daughter had been accepted into the college of her choice and how excited she was. We talked for a few minutes about the school and what she wanted to major in. One of her choices was religious studies and I bit my tongue to warn him and her how that would affect her life and perhaps her faith. Seminary and college studies of religion, biblical scholarship, theology – these all can be real roadblocks to a nice comfortable spiritual life, that's what I wanted to say. She's going to spend her Sunday mornings in worship forever struggling with the effect of her intellect on the traditions in which the church is seeking to involve her.

As I thought about that, I began to toy with what it means to have intellect intersect with tradition and suddenly was struck with this thought. (Remember I've warned you before my mind doesn't travel the "normal" paths. It often wanders off into the brushy swales of Kansas prairies!) Last Saturday, my wife, her sister, our son and I took the youngest of the three sisters out to dinner to celebrate her birthday. We went to a nice steak house. As we walked in the door, I thought to myself you know I'm a 62 year old slightly overweight male whose doctor while she thinks all systems are fine does warn me about my weight and cholesterol. Therefore, I thought, what I should have for dinner is a nice green salad with vinaigrette dressing and a cup of hot green tea preferably organic for all ingredients. My intellect was informing me what I should do and eat and I really thought about that as I sipped a beverage which wasn't green tea and assuredly not organic and chewed my salad with its French and blue cheese dressing, smothering my baked potato with sour cream and butter as I eyed the New York Strip steak, medium rare, sitting on my plate. Tradition clashed with intellect and once again tradition won!

Today, as we entered this worship space, I hope you noticed and thought about the traditions with which we are confronted. Too often I fear we simply look at these and accept them without thinking, without examining them and seeking to find in them meaning, hope, joy. We park our intellect at the door and simply revel in the tradition. And the tradition so often conflicts with our intellects, not that we should always expect traditions to fit into them. However, as we examine this tradition my goal is to involve not simply our memory but also our intellect for too often it is simply memory which informs traditions and not intellect.

Let's look at the Matthean tradition and its story for a few minutes. The story is really quite simple. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, and here the other Mary seems not to be the mother of Jesus but the mother of James and John, are going to the tomb of Jesus and an earthquake occurs opening the tomb. Now before we go any further, we need look back to the previous chapter of Matthew where at the death of Jesus on the cross an earthquake (the earth shook) occurs and many tombs are open and the bodies of the saints are awakened, from death we assume. However, these do not leave their tombs until Jesus is resurrected. The two earthquakes are separated by two days, we might also wonder how they can be so localized as not to have destroyed buildings though the curtain in the temple which fronted the holy of holies is torn by the first one. The story doesn't detail any panic or concern regarding the impact of these natural disasters other than the opening of tombs! It should be pointed out that the

tradition of the death of Jesus including earthquakes is found only in Matthew while the tearing of the curtain of the temple is found in all the synoptics but not John.

The resurrection of Jesus is discovered by the women who go to the tomb where they are met by an angelic creature sitting on the rock which had been sealing the tomb and as they do this the story relates that they felt two things – fear and joy. When confronted by an angel, (Matthew tells us that the angel has an appearance like lightning and clothing white as snow, similar to the appearance and clothing of Jesus during the transfiguration story) the women receive the news of Jesus resurrection and commissioning of them and the disciples with fear and joy. And it is the same emotions they feel when on their way to tell the disciples they are met by the risen Jesus. Consider for a moment that in Mark these same women feel fear and amazement while in Luke there is simply fear and John's witnesses seem almost to be numb! Each of the traditions offers us a different idea of how the receipt of the confession of the resurrection was received.

Throughout Matthew, from the birth narrative to the resurrection story, we recognize that the writer seeks to assure all that this messiah is the new Moses, the one who will lead the people to the promised land of liberation and freedom, justice and hope. Entering Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he is greeted with hosanna or the request for salvation, not spiritual but political from the Romans. And here in his final chapters, while less heavy handed, it is the New Moses who leads even from the tomb the saints or former leaders of the Jewish nation who had died, offering the promises and leadership of God who had led them from the tomb which was Egypt and into the Promised Land which was centered in Jerusalem. It may be a reach but the earthquake which opened the tombs and split the curtain may be a literary interpretation of the parting of the seas as the people are led by new Moses into the new Promised Land. And how can the saints be seen as any but the prophets who offered the vision of God which was a land of not just milk and honey but of justice and of peace.

Consider for a moment this story in a first century and then a twenty-first century settings. In a first century setting, it offers readers and hearers assurance that the one who had led the disciples and other followers was not dead but had been resurrected. And its assurances also seek to reconcile the faith in the new messiah with faith in the old who was Moses by linking the actions of the new with the old. There is a recognition of tradition, of memory. There is a recognition that one can't simply discard a community's traditions and expect it to embrace the new and the novel which is unconnected to its history, its memory. For this community, stories of virgin births, killing of the first born by a tyrannical ruler, miraculous cures, and mocking entries into Jerusalem at Passover – all these fit into their traditions and their memories. The writer of Matthew recognized this and sought to link the one believed to be the Christ because of his resurrection with those memories, those traditions.

For the twenty-first century mind simply to embrace that would require a wholesale discarding of our traditions, our memory. We are a people, post-enlightenment, scientific mind-set folk who know earthquakes but they don't open the graves of saints who are led from them. We are a people who have known and embraced political and spiritual "messiahs" and often they are murdered by others who oppose them and their challenges to accepted practices, their discomfiting denials of embraced traditions. Those fit our memory but while we may embrace and seek to live out their visions, embody their ideas, we don't go to their tombs to find angelic creatures there or meet them suddenly alive and walking with us on the road to anywhere. How do we embrace this tradition of God with us, of Jesus the Christ whom not even execution and

death could separate from us? I have a real concern for mainline Protestant denominations and especially this beloved Presbyterian denomination that what we do is simply say “oh it’s just part of our traditions and we’ll accept it without question or thought.” Too easily we embrace this tradition and when we do that we slice away the very foundation of the possibility of a living faith which in every place and every time calls us to respond to God’s presence with lives of justice, acts of peace making. Our lives are not simple nor are they lived in a vacuum jar or amber chamber in which change just doesn’t happen. We know that in our lifetimes we have seen great change and great enlightenment, progress (I hope) in so many areas. We don’t think anything of communicating in “real time” with friends across the country and the world with words typed, ...er keyboarded into a funny machine, er device and knowing that that can be read by them in seconds. It’s not unusual at all to eat foods from four or five different countries at each meal. And our clothing – well we all know little of it is made here. And our vehicles – well in most of our lifetimes we have gone from almost all cars being made in Detroit to now almost none. Change happens and happens quickly. We rethink, reconfigure, restructure our traditions all the time.

Consider the tradition we celebrate today. It is the tradition of Easter and the promise of Easter is the promise of the resurrection which is a promise that nothing can separate us from God. The tradition says that even when abandoned by his followers, even when denied by them, even when executed and buried by the political entity of the day, the one who embodied God, the one whom we believe to be the Christ – this God with us remains with us. So let’s think about this. If not even death can separate God from us, can our intellectual struggles? Can our rethinking of what it means to be people of faith really mean that God will abandon us? When the tradition tells us that despite all that was done to God’s son on earth God remains with us should we fear that rethinking whom we ordain might cause God to leave us?

Maybe it’s time to re-examine the tradition and build a strong foundation which refuses to deny that despite our best efforts God loves us. Maybe it’s time to re-examine the tradition and build a strong foundation which dares to remind those who would ostracize those who dare to love differently that it is not love which God rejects but hatred. Maybe it’s time to re-examine the tradition and build a strong foundation which dares to remind those who want a society that spends billions on weapons so that it can dominate all others and take what it wants when it wants it that it is not peace which God abhors but violence. And maybe it’s time to re-examine the tradition and build a strong foundation which dares to remind people that Easter is not about God’s commitment to another reality but to this one and to the very creatures who are God’s creation. And a part of that creation is the ability of the human part of God’s creation to think, to change, and to grow. Maybe it’s time to celebrate Easter with fear and with joy. Fear that our faith might be so weak as simply to embrace the tradition but joy that we have the courage to re-think, re-build our traditions. Courage to have green salad with vinaigrette in a steak house! Happy Easter. AMEN.