

Sermon: April 3, 2016 (Easter 2) John 20:19-31
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

Last Sunday we gathered in this place here for our celebration of Easter. Focusing on the account of Jesus' death and resurrection as found in the gospel of Luke, two words emerged to guide us: PERPLEXED and AMAZED. Those who loved Jesus were perplexed when his body was not in the tomb; they were amazed when the resurrection implications of that sunk in.

Your comments to me after that message suggest that this notion of being amazed even while we are perplexed and within that, how we evaluate the credibility of what we are told by scripture, bear further exploration, so today that's what we're going to do. My apologies in advance if today's message spends a bit too much time in the head and not enough time in the heart but some days ya gotta do what ya gotta do.

Before going any farther, I need to state my three most basic operating assumptions: first, that the Bible is sacred text; second, that us humans will always bring our own biases to every story we read and every story we tell; and third, that in the oral traditions that pre-date the writing down of the scripture stories, we see experts at work.

- 1) When I say "sacred text" I mean that I trust that at some level, God is evidenced through the pages of the Bible, in the way that each religion hears the voice of God in its sacred stories. When I look at the stories of the Bible I don't think I am seeing God's handwriting, but I do believe I do see God's fingerprints on the lives of those who put the stories into words.
- 2) On the question of bias, something that was drilled into us in our first week of seminary is that every single one of us has a bias. I remember that we all got pretty defensive at that notion, because when we think of someone who is biased we think of someone who is opinionated or even bullheaded, but the basic idea is that each one of us shapes what we hear and what we say by our personality, our beliefs and our experiences. That is my personal bias, and while I can be aware of it I'll never completely escape it. So as I lovingly approach the Bible, I do so knowing that every Bible story is coloured to some extent by the unique set of religious and cultural influences of its author, and his or her deepest hopes.
- 3) Regarding oral tradition: in that part of the world, in that time of history, in a culture still known for its storytelling, time was taken for a story to be honed so that it could have the greatest impact. There was a loving relationship with the story, but also a purpose or moral attached to its telling. For some contemporary authors, this creates a problem.

Just before Easter, Maclean's magazine ran a provocative cover story entitled, "Did Jesus Really Exist." Citing a recent study into the nature of memory, the reporter, Brian Bethune, concludes that since present-day eyewitness accounts are so prone to inaccuracy, and since there is no agreement in the details of Bible stories, then the oral traditions about Jesus must have been basically false by the time they were written down.

I disagree, almost completely. What was not looked into, by the reporter or the sources he cited, was the research that has been done on indigenous cultures that still rely on oral storytelling, or studies of isolated cultures prior to their first exposure to technology. As a culture that relies heavily on technology to remember things for us, we need to acknowledge how differently memory and storytelling work in cultures that do not rely on a computer, or typewriter, or even a pencil and pad of paper.

It is my assertion that oral cultures which rely on their ability to transmit their stories of heart and soul from one generation to the next, are really good at it. That's how it worked in the days of Jesus, with the stories of his ministry existing as verbal stories, or as loosely jotted down collections for 25 years or more before being collected in the gospels, and for me to call that untrustworthy because I am so reliant on having machines remember things for me, strikes me as dismissive towards all oral cultures, past and present. While I appreciate that oral transmission does have its limitations, it's nowhere near as limited as Bethune makes it out to be.

What I do grant, is that the gap between the event itself, and the writing down of said event, does force us to always look at the Bible in a two-step process: to try to imagine the event that is being

described, free from elaboration; and then take a step back and look at how the author shaped the written version of the story in order to meet a particular purpose with a particular audience.

We start with examining the event being described, with questions like these: What do we know about the events and social structures of the day? Are there any words that we need to be aware of in the Greek, Aramaic or Hebrew? Do the ancient manuscripts of this scripture from around the middle east agree with one another, or were there various versions back then? Is there anything that we might misunderstand because of its cultural setting? Is there anything we need to know in the verses immediately prior, or the verses immediately following? Are there any parts of the story that look like “side comments” thrown in by the narrator? Most of all, at this level we try to let the story speak for itself.

In the case of John chapter 20, there’s not much we need to understand in terms of current events, language or culture. There is one “side comment” in verses 30-31, when John tells us that these stories have been written down to encourage belief in Jesus Christ, but John makes it very clear that he is turning away from the story and speaking directly to the audience – he does not try to weave that comment into the narrative of the story. There is something in verse 18, however, one verse prior to our passage, that we should be aware of.

Mary Magdalene had just met the risen Christ face-to-face, and fresh from that encounter, came to tell the disciples, who respond by...doing nothing. Or at least nothing that we’re told about. For me, this sets the story that follows, about Thomas and his doubts, in a fresh context: Mary’s say-so was not enough for the disciples to believe, and their say-so was not enough for Thomas to believe. Given the opportunity, they wanted to see for themselves.

So, just looking at the story itself, what does this tell us in our day? For me, it says that even the ancient Church was well aware of the question of credibility. Nobody wants to hear second-hand if they can see for themselves, whether it’s the disciples, or Thomas, or skeptics in 2016 who says they won’t believe anything that can’t be proven and then proven again. The little interpretive note added by John underlines the value of believing without seeing, but the story itself acknowledges that as humans we yearn for Jesus, face to face.

Next, we take one giant step back, and start asking questions about the person who wrote the story down. Do we know when it was written, and by whom, and for whom? Are there specific traditions that we know of that may have been added to the story while still in its oral version? Do we know anything that was going on in the life and times of the author that might impact the way that he or she told the story? In short, what do we know about the author – and their purpose – and their audience?

Probably the easiest way to get at this, is to see if the same story is told in more than one place and compare those versions. In the case of today’s reading, it’s found in all four gospels, which doesn’t happen too often but works in our favour today: the appearance of Jesus to his disciples is found in the 28th chapter of Matthew (16-20), 16th chapter of Mark (14-18), and 24th chapter of Luke (36-49), as well as the 20th chapter of John (19-31).

Curiously, some of the earliest manuscripts of Mark end without Jesus appearing to the male disciples, ending instead with the women at the empty tomb too terrified to say anything about what they had seen. The manuscripts that do have a postscript do what Mark usually does: he makes his point then he’s outta there: Jesus appeared to the disciples at an undisclosed location, scolded their lack of faith, and gave them all the power they needed to preach and heal in his name. Mark is thought to be the earliest of the gospels, and of all the gospels, we see the least “agenda” here, other than encouraging Christians in a general way to spread the word about discipleship.

Matthew tells us that the disciples had gathered in Galilee, not Jerusalem, with Jesus simply telling them to go into the world and baptize in his name. In the days of Jesus, and continuing into the days of the early Church, we know there was an ongoing feud between those who held official power in Jerusalem and the outliers in places like Galilee, who did not much like this centralized power. By setting the meeting between Jesus and the disciples back on their old home turf, was Matthew perhaps telling the folks in Galilee to stay the course and not worry what the official powerbrokers in the big city had to say?

Luke, perhaps on the other side of the debate, clearly specifies Jerusalem as the location where Jesus appeared to the disciples and also says that Jesus did not yet grant them the power of the Holy Spirit until

an officially-sanctioned gathering in Jerusalem, i.e. the first Christian Pentecost. Could it be that Luke was more connected to the institutional Church, and wants those reading his version of the story to play by the rules, and stay formally connected to the structures rather than going off on one's own?

And then there is John. We call the other three gospels the "synoptics" because of their fairly linear, event-based accounts of Jesus – they give a "synopsis," if you will, of his life – whereas John is much more concerned with theology than history. To borrow a line from Marcus Borg, John is concerned more with the Christ of faith, than the Jesus of history, and makes no apologies for that. Likely written much later than the other gospels, John had likely seen more conflict between Christians and Jews than had Matthew, Mark and Luke, and validates this by speaking of how afraid the disciples were, and who they were afraid of. John also presents Jesus' appearance to the disciples as miraculous, appearing in their midst even though the doors were locked. While this might make it look like John is turning it into a ghost story of sorts, this use of the miraculous is very consistent with the rest of his gospel, for John structured his entire story of Jesus around the miracle stories. Saying that the first encounter between the risen Christ and the disciples had a miraculous element to it, says to me that it's business as usual - the same Jesus who amazed the disciples when they walked the countryside together, will continue to do so now that he is risen.

As we look at these four accounts of the same event, we most definitely see what each of the gospel writers is hoping for: we see their biases, their reasons for writing and can perhaps even picture who they were writing for. These questions of purpose and audience are key for anyone doing communications work today, and they were just as important for the Bible authors way back when. But the question then arises: if these four stories can be this different; if bias can make this much of a difference; doesn't that just make the stories sheer make-believe?

Much as I hate to admit it, I have a lot of sympathy for this question. Especially in the world of today, when the quick sound bite and the use of "spin" is so widespread, we are wise to be wary when the same story gets told in different ways. But while such cynicism makes great sense in our world, I need to repeatedly remind myself that my world, and world that Jesus and John lived in, have little in common.

In the year 312 AD, the Roman Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity, and that personal decision set in motion a political process that completely changed everything. Critics of Christianity are absolutely correct to remind us of the entitlement that came when Christianity became "official". But the original disciples following Jesus, and the early Church of John's era, were 250 years before that; they did not have the benefit of Rome's protection; in fact, quite the opposite was true. Granted, the official record says almost nothing about Jesus, his life or his crucifixion, but what about the thousands of people who had heard him preach, and then heard that he was risen, who gave their lives for their belief in him? Ten years after Jesus – and fifty years after Jesus – and two hundred years after Jesus - people were willing to risk life and limb to be baptized into his extraordinary message of reconciliation, mercy and life, with women and slaves particularly drawn to his promise of life anew. Amidst all the legendary stories of the saints is the reality that scores of them died agonizing deaths because of their belief in Christ Jesus.

Examined through the lens of the world of today which has no shortage of suicide bombers willing to die for their beliefs, the deaths of the early Christian martyrs may not be seen as positive evidence of anything, but if we can somehow escape our current state of distress and put ourselves in the sandals of those who faced stoning or crucifixion because of their commitment to Christ the Lord of love, we have something to ponder. Unlike a 21st century publicist, attempting to sell a product for personal gain, each of the gospel writers desperately believed in the saving power of Jesus Christ and needed their contemporaries to know about it. Not because they would get rich because of it, but because they were willing to give everything – even their lives – for it.

Much as I would like to think of myself as brilliant and sophisticated, especially in comparison with the uneducated crew that traipsed around with Jesus, the most compelling arguments in favour of Jesus are made not by my favourite theologians, but by those who were closest to the action and those who had the least to gain by their story being accepted. I am amazed by the beauty of the sermon on the mount, the complexity of the parables, the simplicity of the Lord's Prayer, and without those who orally rehearsed the words, and then wrote them down, I would know none of it. I owe the shape of my life to those early witnesses. None of the gospel writers lived a safer life after writing his gospel than before writing it; none of them was given a garland of gold and a cushy job in the governor's office. In spite of the dangers of

saying so, they considered the story of Jesus as precious, and true, and that counts for everything in my books.

Am I still perplexed by much of what I read in scripture? Yes, mostly. Do I have my doubts about it, in little ways that hardly matter at all and big ways that cause me to wake up in a cold sweat at night? Of course I do - I fret and wonder as much as the next person, perhaps more. But that is countered by the amazement. I am amazed by that blue-collar guy from up north in Galilee who embodied and articulated God's love in such advanced ways. I am amazed that when life seems most bleak, I feel the presence of the risen Christ who saves, redeems and fulfills my life. I am amazed by the depth of compassion, forgiveness and hope that I have encountered in life, and which I have occasionally shared with others, all in the name of Jesus. At the end of it all, I am truly Perplexed, and Amazed, and Grateful, and Blessed. Amen.

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