

Easter

April 12, 2009

Keith Miller, one of the most effective writers and speakers on the Christian life, tells a story about a woman named “Alice” in his book Habitation of Dragons. She and Miller were members of a small group of adults who had banded together in order:

to deepen their spiritual lives;

to learn how to love Christ-like more truly and fully;

to be open to and more vulnerable with each other and with God.

As a way to strengthen their community bond, the group shared their spiritual autobiographies. Alice’s was a story Miller would never forget. It went like this:

“When I was a tiny little girl, I was put in an orphanage. I wasn’t very pretty, and no one wanted me. Still, I wanted to be adopted and loved by a family more than anything else. I thought about it day and night. But everything I did seemed to go wrong. I tried too hard to please everybody who came to look at me, and all I did was drive them away.

“Then one day the head of the orphanage told me that a family was going to come and take me home with them. I was so excited I jumped up and down and cried. The matron reminded me that I was on trial and that it might not be permanent. But I just knew it would be. So I went with this family and started to school in their town, a very happy little girl.

But one day, a few months later, I skipped home from school and ran in the front door of the big old house we lived in. No one was home, but there in the middle of the front hall was my old battered suitcase with my coat thrown over it. As I stood there and looked at the suitcase, it slowly dawned on me what it meant ... They didn't want me, and I hadn't even suspected."

At this point, Miller said that Alice stopped speaking for a moment. Yet the group hardly noticed. They were waiting for her to continue, each seeing in his or her own imagination the battered suitcase in the front hall. And trying desperately not to cry.

"Alice cleared her throat. And then she said, almost matter-of-factly, 'That happened to me 7 times before I was 13 years old'."

Miller and the group, looking at this tall, 40 year old woman sitting next to them, silently wept, as one member stood to give her a hug, to reassure her of her lovability, acceptance, worth. That is, until Alice startled them by saying, "Don't be sad for me. I needed my past. You see, it brought me to God" (pg. 183).

He had died in great agony and the loneliest of deaths:

convicted as a felon;

victim of an incredibly cruel death penalty;

repudiated as a traitor;

humiliated as a prophet wannabe;

silenced once and for all as a heretic;

abandoned by the God he had proclaimed with profound intimacy and uttermost certainty; and
abandoned by the disciples:

with whom he had spent years traveling and teaching; and,

with whom he had shared his abundant life.

Now, they were nowhere to be found, interested only in saving their own skins. All the Gospel writers agree on this, even though their details of what happened at the last moments of his life may vary. Jesus had entered what Hans Kung calls “the insurmountable frontier” – death – which is “the end of everything.”

And with his death, the cause of Jesus, the mission of Jesus,
the validity of Jesus, the Jesus metric with its core of 12 guys and 1 God,
also ceased to exist. He had been exposed as a fraud, a holy fake, a dissembler of the people.
With his death, Jesus and his cause had been utterly refuted.

In one of the histories of World War II, it's told that as they swept across Germany near the end of hostilities, Allied forces searched farms and houses looking for snipers. At one abandoned house, almost a heap of rubble, searchers with flashlights found their way to the basement. There, on a crumbling wall, a victim of the Holocaust had scratched a Star of David. Beneath it, in rough lettering, was the message:

I believe in the sun – even when it does not shine;

I believe in love – even when it is not shown;

I believe in God – even when he does not speak.

One wonders if the disciples of Jesus had even this glimmer of faith left after Friday's onslaught that saw Jesus crucified and killed. And when his corpse was laid in the rock-hewn vault of Joseph of Arimathea, the Jesus movement lay every bit as dead as he was. Woe be unto his disciples.

“Don't be sad for me,” Alice told the group, “I needed my past. You see, it brought me to God” ... and something of the very same thing could be said about the disciples in their Easter experience, and frankly, sinners that we are, for us as well. The ghastly events in the “valley of the shadow of death” that they had traveled from the Thursday night before until that Easter morn had brought them to God, made them acutely aware of their need for a Savior. In much the same way, in our own day at our own moment in our own circumstances, it's only when we recognize

our own insufficiency,

our own misery,

our own dependency,

our own helplessness,

our own unworthiness,

our own desperate need for a higher power, that we too are “brought to God.”

Easter faith, in other words, does not exist because Jesus is proclaimed; the Easter faith is proclaimed because Jesus lives. Easter faith:

begins with an experience of the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus, who is then gracefully raised from the grave by God;

begins when early on the 1st day of the week, Mary and her mates go looking for a dead man, and instead are frightened out of their wits by an angel's announcement to look for the living;

begins with the tragedy of Good Friday, whose intent and power are trampled underfoot by the resurrected Christ;

begins for many of us with a tragic loss that threatens to break us or our family;

an ill-advised marriage that saps all the joy out of life;

an untimely death which rips such a hole in the fabric of our lives that it defies mending;

an incredibly dumb and destructive and depleting relationship;

a self-focused, narcissistic attitude that negates our ability to love others and be loved for ourselves;

an addiction that becomes the false idol we worship, our own golden calf;

a sin left unchecked and un-repented and unaccounted for;

despite any and all of which, through the victory of Jesus over the grave, by the mercy of God, we are promised and offered and raised to new life, new possibilities, new relationships, new hope.

We've just celebrated some Easter baptisms and we've got a lot of guests today. What shall we tell them of this Easter faith? How do high-tech, cyber-sensitive, people-from-Missouri come to know Easter to be true? How can it be more than what Woody Allen once said: "Diane Keaton believes in God. But she also believes that the radio works because there are tiny people inside it."?

J.B. Phillips provided an answer in his marvelous little book Your God Is Too Small. He said to try an experiment. When in genuine need, when pushed to the limit by the storms of life, when assailed by personal demons and assaulted on every front by dark and destructive forces that threaten to consume you, pray with all your heart: "Oh, William Shakespeare, help me!" and see what happens. Or try praying to Karl Marx, or Eleanor Roosevelt, or Dean Smith or Coach K or whoever: "Help me!" and see what happens. And then pray: "Jesus, Son of the living God, help me!" and see what happens. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating.

I promise the power of God will overshadow you in this Jesus, who lives, not as Monsieur Eiffel lives on through his tower, but as one who dwells in us and among us as the very Presence of God. Implore Jesus as the Christ-power that transcends understanding, and proofs will come upon you, and change you and restore you and heal you and make you new.

From the oldest strata of the primitive Christian communities on, for nearly 2000 years, this has been the testimony on which Christianity stands or falls. Jesus lives.

Alice knew this. She understood that there is no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday
and that it is only by and thru the power of God that any of us:

no matter what our past has been,

no matter our short-comings or far reaching accomplishments,

no matter how dark the stain or dire the pain,

are healed and redeemed and restored and saved and resurrected.

And that is the mystical, mighty truth that we celebrate on this sacred day, and need tell of to
those with ears to hear or eyes to see.

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!