

Wrestling with Resurrection

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 15 April 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Kevin Dallas

Easter 3B

John 20: 19-31; Acts 4: 32-35

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Gatherings" tab

In her very accessible book *"In Defence of Doubt"* Val Webb makes the following observation in a chapter on doubts and faith community. She writes:

"In reality we do tend to be grouped in denominations according to overarching doctrinal positions, but the majority of us who claim a denominational affiliation did not do so by a selective process of comparative study, but rather were born into a community and thus espoused its doctrinal umbrella!" Or in my case its banner.

She goes onto to say:

"While we grew up accepting the dogma it was the relationship with the church community that held us there or forced us to leave".

"When a community sees adherence to certain propositions as the glue that determines the community and affiliates--doubting Thomases may have no place".

I can relate well to the "born into" proposition.

The family history, as told to me by my father, is that my grandfather (this is early 1900s) was a paid up active member of the communist party in South London. The town square in Bromley (where the family lived) was a scene of great activity on most Sunday afternoons. I guess you can imagine many competing voices, soapbox style, could be heard, one of which was Walter Dallas, my grandfather. Trouble was, on this particular Sunday evening, he was competing head on with the local Salvation Army band. They first drowned him out, then they converted him. No doubt, he knelt at the bass drum (the portable mercy seat). Walter's life changed and that single decision has profoundly influenced the generations that have followed.

My own Father, Richard, returning from a grim time in WW2 where he had been held captive in a number of German POW camps after being taken prisoner at Dunkirk, was clear in his own mind, having been spared (His two brothers had died in combat) he would spend the rest of his life in the service of God within the ranks of the Salvation Army.

By the age of 17 the glue that held me was not the Salvation Army doctrinal position but rather its musical life (played and sung liturgy) Its Brass Bands enthralled me. At age 19 I found myself working in London and fortunate enough to be playing in one of the Army's acknowledged premier bands, ultimately touring many parts of the Salvation Army world making regular recordings and broadcasts. In between busily establishing a career and raising a family. I first visited Australia back in 1980 behind a mouthpiece before returning to emigrate in 1982 – with Judith and our two young daughters.

A hectic 10 years followed as we took our place just around the corner from this building at Sydney Congress Hall. Further involvement in the musical life of the then large band as they toured North America in 1985, and in 1991 came the irony of a tour back to the United Kingdom. I guess I had come full circle and it was not long after that trip that my time in a Salvation Army uniform came to an end.

In line with today's reading from Acts it is worth reflecting and stating that in all of these places community was a vital expression and experience, the lived gospel in Christian community is always a great challenge. Community building was one of the memorable and significant marks of my parent's ministry: their ability to create good and loving, caring community.

During those years of observing and listening to many expositions of doctrinal positions from various Salvation Army pulpits my personal "*wrestling with resurrection*" emerged. No great clarity, just a simmering disquiet: What is all this about?

26 years ago, upon leaving the ranks of the Salvation Army, Judith and I experienced 10 years of a local Baptist Church, where a key focus was given to God's Grace – and this provided a perfect bridge to more challenging theological terrain.

Then an encounter early in 2000 with visiting voices to Australia, people like John Shelby Spong, Richard Holloway and a brief but significant time spent in Melbourne as members of Francis MacNab's church, opened up greater paths of understanding.

Today, I still endeavour to continue to be open to seeking out new voices, helping me expand and extend my faith journey. After almost 15 years worshipping in this place, I trust I am still growing.

Today's reading from John's Gospel takes us behind a locked door and the account, the narrative, of the first appearance by Jesus to his disciples when the words placed on his lips are '*Receive the holy Spirit*'

Later, challenged by Thomas, who on that occasion so the narrative claims, was not present, Thomas proclaims: "*unless I see the marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side I will not believe*".

We are then told, in this account, that a week goes by; and in the same house with the room locked again, but with Thomas present this time Jesus came and stood among them - with the words uttered by Jesus, "*Thomas put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put into my side, stop doubting and believe.*"

Thomas's response is recorded as *"My lord and My God"*

Now, it is at this point, I would like to share two versions or explanations that have significantly helped me through this doubting process.

One extract is from John Spong's book *"Rescuing Christianity from Fundamentalism"*. The other is from Keith Ward's book *"What the bible really teaches - A Challenge to Fundamentalists"*. Keith Ward, now retired but at one time Regius Professor of Divinity at Oxford University and an ordained Anglican minister.

As an aside - it occurred to me how stereotypical this was: the American, Spong, wants to rescue them (the fundamentalist) and the Englishman, Ward, wants to challenge them!!

In a chapter under the heading *Resurrection* Keith Ward writes, referencing Luke 24 verse 37 which Mark read to us last week, the words are:

"They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a Ghost".

Keith Ward writes:

"It was no less than physical, like a spirit. It was more than physical, a complete transfiguration of the physical world into a greater spiritual reality, with the power to appear as a physical form for the sake of those who found it hard to believe such a transfiguration has happened or could happen".

He goes on

"This parallels the account in John's gospel where Thomas the Twin was invited to put his hands into the wounds of Jesus side. These physical manifestations of Jesus were real and like the empty tomb, validated in a convincing way, the belief that it was Jesus who was appearing to them in a new form, and not just some supernatural spirit or angel sent from God, or possibly the devil. Thomas' response is the only place in the Gospels where divinity is explicitly ascribed to Jesus: "My Lord and my God".

The proper response to Jesus invitation is not to say, "Ah, I see that you are an ordinary physical human being after all" it is rather to say "You have power over all things, even the physical forms of the universe. But you transcend them all in the power and the reality of your being".

Now contrast this with Spong writing back in the early 1990's. He says:

When the experience of Easter was first put into words, it was simply a proclamation without narrative. Jesus Lives! Death cannot contain him! Proclamations, however, never remain simply proclamations; they inevitably create a narrative to explain them. Jesus lives! Became "we have seen the Lord" and gave rise to all the appearance stories. "Death cannot contain him" was expanded into such shouts as "O death where is your sting? O grave where is your victory? "Then later the concept was encapsulated into narratives about a tomb that was empty and a grave that had been escaped. The essence of the gospel is never found in the narrative, but all of the irreconcilable contradictions are. In the telling and the retelling of the story, the facts were bent, twisted and even changed.

The Biblical literalist wants to claim inerrancy for what is in fact a narrative two steps removed from the reality it seeks to narrate. Behind the narrative is an un-narrated proclamation; behind the proclamation is an intense life-giving experience.

The task of bible study is to lead believers into the truth, a truth that is never captured in mere words but a truth that is real, a truth that, when experience erupts within us in expanding ways, calling us simultaneously deeper and deeper into life and coincidentally, deeper and deeper into God. Our Christ has come, said the fourth gospel, that we “may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10; 10).

So having related these two summaries by two eminent (still living) theologians what do we take from them? Keith Ward with the powerful propositions: *“It was more than physical”* on the one hand and Spong on the other *“Not persuaded enough to offer any plausible explanation, simply embracing the power of the Proclamation and the lived experience of the disciples”*. I understand that I have just skated across issues that have kept the world’s greatest theologians and preachers occupied for generations.

I am sure, that if I stopped here and elicited a period of discussion amongst us, I’d get many and varied responses from the lived experience of those here today. I personally find the contrast helpful and I find something in each outline with which I can resonate.

My personal experience that goes directly back to my forefathers is the true test of resurrection as the transforming power.

Resurrection as Life and Love, by the grace of the same Holy Spirit bestowed on those early disciples, it fulfils our thirst for fullness of life and Love. Regardless of what we make of the ancient accounts, complex and contradictory as they are, it all becomes real when it gets personal.

Reborn, renewal, rebirth a fresh start from darkness to light whatever inadequate words are framed to describe the experience, it’s for the transforming spirit we yearn. This is what the Jesus story offers each successive generation.

Finally I want to return to Spong’s assertion concerning seeking the truth,

The earlier quote was: *“A truth that is never captured in mere words but a truth that is real”*

I believe that to be true for myself. Our senses, our core spirituality transcends the world of words - messy, imprecise and misleading as they can be. For me it also transcends the world of a literal explanation and understanding. As Margaret stated last week in her reflection when referencing resurrection, ultimately the precise and exact events are unknowable.

But the experience has been known by millions.

In closing I would like to offer a moments reflection and have chosen a simple choral performance from Salvation Army musical liturgy, which speaks to resurrection.

Taking the words from John's gospel Chapter 11 verse 25 on the lips of Jesus to Martha: *"I am the resurrection and life, he who believes in me will never die"*.

Let us use the moment, if you can, to meditate on your inward lived reality concerning the proclamation *"Jesus lives"* and the offer of life – and life abundant.