

Deepak Chopra writes: “Jesus is in trouble. When people worship him today—or even speak his name—the object of their devotion is unlikely to be who they think he is. A mythical Jesus has grown up over time. He has served to divide peoples and nations. He has led to destructive wars in the name of religious fantasies. The legacy of love found in the New Testament has been tainted with the worst sort of intolerance and prejudice that would have appalled Jesus in life. Most troubling of all, his teachings have been hijacked by people who hate in the name of love.” These are tough words for the church to hear but words we must hear. Often Jesus/God is seen as a cosmic Santa Claus or EMT who comes to rescue and give us what we want or heal our wounds. We cannot be like the fabled ostrich hiding his/her head in the ground when trouble comes—thinking that what we can’t see or what we can’t hear won’t hurt us. Distorted images of Jesus and the Church have and are hurting us. Thus, the question(s) for us:

What does Easter mean to you?

What do you see and hear this Easter 2008?

What have you seen lately?

Our resurrection journey continues. Over these Sundays of Lent we have looked at the resurrection stories. We now continue with the rest of the story in John’s Gospel. Peter and John have been told by Mary that the tomb is empty and they have rushed to see what has happened. They found the tomb empty. There were the folded grave clothes and face cloth. The tomb is empty. They have just had the events of Friday sink in and now, now there is the empty tomb. They leave confused, not sure what they really believe...they have more questions than answers: fearful, apprehensive and filled with an unknown awe, Peter and John have returned home.

Mary, filled with grief stays behind. She looks into the tomb again (or maybe for the first time) and there are two angels quietly sitting there. They ask, “Why are you weeping?” “Who are you looking for?” “What is the cause of your tears?” Mary responds, “I don’t know where they have taken him.” She needs to mourn but the tomb is empty. How can she mourn without his body? They give no response. She turns and there is a man, perhaps a gardener, he may know what has happened. “Where have you taken him?” She needs to know.

I wonder how long the pause was, the silence between Mary’s question and the word of Jesus, “Mary”. She knows the voice. It is his voice, the teacher, the rabbi. She has seen the Lord. Imagine the impact of those words, spoken for the first time, “I have seen the Lord.” The world has just been turned upside-down. Their mourning has been turned to joy just as Jesus promised. *“In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me...Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy”* (John 16:16, 22). There is no greater testimony to this day than the words of Mary, ***“I have seen the Lord.”***

Our Easter question was raised by Jesus earlier in his ministry. In Mark 8:29 he asks of his followers, “Who do you say I am?” He has asked the disciples what the people think. They have reported to him the village gossip. “Some say you are John the Baptist, others say Elijah.” They have heard what the people are saying and are eager to repeat what the people are saying about him. We may even do the same. We know what the preacher says; after all he is paid to believe that. We may know what our grandmother or mother said about who Jesus is. We may even remember what some

Sunday school teacher said about him years ago. This is all well and good. It means that we did do some listening in those days. But that is not the question of today.

Neither is the other question a valid one for today, “What have you done with him?” As we have mentioned at the beginning, the image of Jesus has been distorted by the Church through the centuries. Much has been done in his name that he would not want credited to him. We can all point to the failure of the Church and even our own failures on his behalf. Our history is not untarnished-- we have all sinned. And yet, we, the Church, have also done major good in the world in his name: hospitals have been founded, the sick cared for. Orphanages have been established and widows cared for. We have shown an immense amount of love and caring to the world. A recent report from the area devastated by hurricane Katrina indicates how the most lasting good in rebuilding and re-establishing lives has come from church and para-church organizations—not government. We have reached out far beyond ourselves in times of need and through our love for Christ shared our bounty. We continue to do so.

But we also have our dark side, as Deepak Chopra reminds us. We have occasionally lost or denied the Christ of the Gospels. For example, some try to explain away Scriptures we don’t want to follow. Dispensationalism tells us that some verses are for an age other than ours. If these verses are for another age then we don’t have to follow them. Loving your enemies is not for today...therefore it is okay to hate in Jesus name. I imagine how Christ shudders when these words are written or preached. Yes, at times, we have been most unChristlike in Christ’s name.

That however is not the question of Easter. “What have you seen?” or “Who do you say that I am?”—is the Easter question. Yes, we need to ask, “Where have you taken him?” We need to answer it honestly to the world asking to see Jesus. We have messed up and strayed off course. I wonder if some of the anger about recent statements of leading pastors is because they speak the truth and we don’t want to hear the truth. We have sinned and stand in need of forgiveness and we must repent before the world. But that is not the question of today. Today’s question is: “What have you seen lately?”

Peter and John saw an empty tomb. They saw the folded grave clothes and face cloth. They left only able to confirm--the tomb was empty. Thomas in a few hours would state that he would not believe until he saw Jesus with his own eyes, touched him with his own hands. He could not believe the reality of Easter as his own until he saw and touched for himself. Only Mary saw the Rabbi, “I have seen the Lord.”

Why am I here today? It is not because you pay me to be here. Although there would be some raised eyebrows had I not shown up. It is not because of the history of the Church and it is because of the history of the Church. (The people who have kept the faith and who have continued to love the Church when it has strayed from its path and moved it into dark and difficult days...the faith of those who have kept the faith have given the Church continued hope). I am here today because I, too, have seen the Lord. No, it has not been through any dream, vision or revelation – but through a deep unexplainable awareness of not being alone – we call it faith. Faith that because HE lives I live also.

“What have you seen lately?”

Chopra, Deepak, The Third Jesus, Harmony Books, New York, 2008 (p.7)