

Easter III/Tromba Baptism

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread. Luke 24:35

In a few moments we will welcome William Henry Tromba into the body of Christ through the sacrament of baptism. As always, this is a special joy for us here at St. John's. And as always, we ask ourselves *what are we doing, what do we mean when we baptize someone into Christ's death and new life?*

The Easter season is a particularly fitting time to ask such questions. Our Gospel stories in Easter tell us not of the life and work of the Nazarene, the human Jesus. The Gospels speak, rather, of the disciples' encounters with the Risen Christ, the resurrection experience.

Today, we hear the familiar and beloved story of the Road to Emmaus. Two of Jesus' followers are walking sadly along, reviewing the traumatic details of recent days: trial, crucifixion, disappearance of Jesus' body. They encounter someone they do not recognize, and recount the story to him. He then rehearses for them all the Hebrew Scripture that prophesies the coming of a Messiah. The disciples still don't know whom they're talking with. They don't know until, finally, they sit down to eat with him, and then, when he breaks the bread and blesses it, they recognize him. And at once he *vanishes from their sight.*

The season of Easter, perhaps more than any other in the Christian calendar, is a time when many of us wrestle with the question of who was this Risen Christ? What do we mean by the Resurrection? If we don't believe in the physical reconstruction of the body, what do we think happened here?

The Gospel accounts of resurrection appearances make it clear that the Risen Christ was different from the human Jesus. He can walk through doors. On the other hand, he is hungry. He eats fish. He is not entirely different from the historical Jesus, but not entirely the same, either. Most tellingly, his nearest and dearest, his closest circle of friends, consistently fail to recognize him. Magdalene at the tomb thinking he's the gardener, Thomas with his skepticism and need to touch, Cleopas and the other guy on the Road to Emmaus – to none of these is Jesus immediately recognizable. So, what has happened? Who is the Risen Christ?

This week, instead of *what has happened to Jesus*, I found myself asking, *what has happened to the disciples?* Who are they now? What have they become in *this brave new world, that has such creatures in it?*

I have also been pondering, this week, the events of 40 years ago, the first week of April, 1968. Let me set the personal scene a bit. I was a senior at Radcliffe, and I'd been married for nearly a year to a classmate from Harvard. At my graduation from Radcliffe, three months hence, most of us would wear black armbands protesting the war in Vietnam. George Wald, Harvard professor of Biology and Nobel Prize winner, would be our guest speaker, and would say things about the War and about America that would have sounded as incendiary to many as Reverend Jeremiah Wright's remarks have sounded in recent weeks.

We despised and deplored Lyndon Johnson, our President. At protest marches we would chant things about him that I can't repeat from this pulpit. But on March 31 of that year I sat in the family room of my in-laws house in Wilmington Delaware to listen to Johnson's speech. Here's how James Carroll described that speech in last Monday's *Globe*.

America was in the grip of the foundational violence of its war against Vietnam, which, while killing thousands in Southeast Asia, was causing massive divisions in the United States, divisions that were increasingly violent. There was no separating that distant war from the broad social, political, and racial discord that made 1968 America's *annus terribilis*. On this date in that year, the man most responsible made a valiant attempt both to turn away from violence and to reckon with his own role as its instigator.

In a televised address, President Lyndon B. Johnson surprised the world by announcing a major de-escalation of American hostilities, a cessation of almost all bombing of North Vietnam, coupled with a plea to Hanoi for negotiations aimed at a political settlement. Johnson effectively renounced the goal of military victory.

My father-in-law was a career Navy man from South Carolina. What he said in response to Johnson's speech I can't repeat from this pulpit either. My oldest brother-in-law had enlisted in the Marines. His face fell when Johnson announced the cessation of bombing. "I have to say I'm kind of disappointed," he confessed. But he was not ultimately to be disappointed; he served two tours of duty in Vietnam.

The astounded joy and hope that my young husband and I felt in that evening had to be muted, needless to say, to prevent physical violence from breaking out in that suburban family room. And our joy and hope were to be short-lived, in any event.

Here's how Jim Carroll interprets Johnson's actions, 40 years later.

In leaving the presidency, Johnson was accepting the ethical consequences of the mistake he had made. He could not pretend that the many thousands of deaths in Vietnam, and the torn fabric of American society, were of no significance to him. The words he spoke that night were not nearly as eloquent as the simple action he took, and nothing else could have given such truthful expression to the burden he felt.

At last, it was possible to believe that the president of the United States had been paying attention to the loss of life, erosion of community, skepticism of the young, disappointment of the old, despair of the poor - all that had followed on his foundational choices.

Lyndon Johnson stood before us as an American Oedipus - seeing the truth of what he had done, and doing what to him was the political equivalent of self-blinding. The last words of his speech concerned honor and sacrifice - "the sacrifice that duty may require."

But for once, an American president understood that responsibilities of honor and sacrifice belonged more to him than to anyone.

Johnson's action should have been the climax of that American tragedy, but it was not. The devils were loose, and the spirit of violence was unchecked. Four days after the speech, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, opening an abyss into which, with much else, the meaning of Johnson's momentous deed fell like a stone.

I can't begin to deal with King's assassination in this sermon, which will already be too long. But it haunts me, as it haunts so many of us who lived through it and were formed by the violence of those years, as I contemplate the passions stirred up by Barack Obama's candidacy.

There's another major point I want to make about Lyndon Johnson's presidency: it was he, as Hillary controversially and correctly pointed out not long ago, who engineered the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Martin Luther King Junior may have been the inspirational figure whose spiritual and rhetorical genius most galvanized the Civil Rights movement, but it was Johnson's political skill that insured the bill's passage. And Johnson's commitment to civil rights would cost the Democratic Party, his party, the allegiance of the South for a generation. He understood that then.

For most of the rest of us, the meaning and consequences of Lyndon Johnson's life and actions have taken much longer to understand and evaluate. As it has taken decades for the country to understand and evaluate Dr. King's vulnerabilities and his legacy. Martin Luther King was not a plaster saint. And Lyndon Johnson was not an unqualified villain. But it has taken time and maturity to absorb those complicated truths. Those of us who were coming of age in the midst of the turmoil of the 1960's are very different people now. I know I speak for more than just myself when I say that our minds and hearts are changed. Not because we are particularly special, but because we have grown and lived through 40 years, and we have been transformed.

Life will do that to you. Life will teach you that most people are neither *this* nor *that*, all saint or all villain; will teach you, in fact, that people may be very different from what you thought or were able to comprehend. Time will teach you that most events are susceptible to – and indeed merit– multiple perspectives, multiple interpretations. The story doesn't stay fixed, it moves. And we move with it, and are moved by it.

Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King no longer walk the earth. But their legacies live on to challenge and inspire us, our understandings of them continue to transmute and evolve, and our communities and the greater society have been enriched and changed forever by their contributions.

Now, neither of those men was Jesus, nor are we among the original disciples. But imagine what they are going through in those early days, and for the rest of their lives. Their challenge is not simply to figure out who Jesus has become as the Risen Christ, but who they are, and what they will become.

So, Jesus appears to different ones of them at different times and in different forms. He appears as a gardener, a sort of ghost who can walk through doors, a biblical teacher, a guy with wounds you can touch, a guy who eats a piece of fish. He is neither *this* nor *that*, he is this *and* that.

And we have four Gospels, four different accounts of what happens after the crucifixion, and to whom, and why. One story is not enough. The Gospels offer multiple perspectives, multiple interpretations. The story doesn't stay fixed, it moves. And we move with it, and are moved by it.

So I'm thinking that the post-Resurrection stories are not so much about what happens to the Nazarene, not really, as about what happens to the group around him who lived and worked with him and loved him, and who stay together to love and work with who and what remains after the crucifixion. Who are they now? What will they become in the company of the Risen Christ?

So, little Will Tromba. It is these questions into which we welcome you, into which we baptize you. We are the group who stay together to love and work with who and what remains after the crucifixion. Who are we now, and what will we become in the company of the Risen Christ? Join us, and we will seek and learn together.

Alleluia! Alleluia! Amen