

COLUMNISTS

We need to get beyond Easter rhetoric

The dictionary defines "boilerplate" as formulaic or stereotypical language. Easter, like Christmas, is a feast that tends to stimulate the flow of religious boilerplate.

There is nothing inherently wrong with boilerplate, mind you. Although "formulaic" and "stereotypical," it nonetheless expresses truth.

On Easter Sunday, therefore, it will be entirely incumbent upon the church to proclaim yet again that Christ is truly risen from the dead, and that his rising from the dead is the basis and hope of our salvation. So, too, will it be fitting for preachers to repeat the now familiar words, "We are an Easter people, and 'Alleluia' is our song."

But if we do not get beyond those rhetorical surfaces, the Resurrection itself can assume a shadowy, almost imaginary character. We will nod in silent agreement to something that has little or no real meaning for us.

If the Resurrection were a quite simple and straightforward matter — Jesus' miraculous coming back to his former life in order to fulfill his own clear prophecy and to establish once and for all his credentials as the divine Redeemer — then we either believe it or we do not. But the New Testament calls us to something more than that.



BY FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

essays in theology

Given their understanding of resurrection from the dead as something linked to the end of the world, Jesus' Jewish disciples would not have expected to encounter him on Easter. And, in fact, they were utterly unprepared for that encounter when it did occur.

For example, when Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the tomb Sunday morning to anoint Jesus' body with "prepared spices and perfumed oils" (Luke 23:56), they fully anticipated finding his body there. There was no question of one of them saying to the other, "Let's go to tomb to see if he has risen yet."

In John's account, when Mary Magdalene discovered the tomb to be empty, she immediately rushed to tell Peter and John, not that "He is risen," but that "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they put

him" (John 20:2). (So much for a long-popular assumption that the empty tomb is one of the proofs that Jesus truly rose from the dead.) Only after Peter and John went to the tomb did Mary Magdalene see the two angels and then Jesus himself.

In Luke's account, by way of contrast, it was immediately after their arrival at the tomb and while they were "still puzzling" over the scene (24:4) that the two angels appeared and announced that Jesus had risen from the dead. Only then did Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James leave to convey the news to the 11 Apostles and the other disciples.

Luke also gives us an account of Jesus' appearance to two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (24:13-35). The disciples did not at first recognize him. (So much, too, for another popular assumption that, when Jesus rose from the dead, he simply resumed his former life.)

Indeed, it was not until they had stopped for the night that the two disciples' eyes were opened. They recognized the risen Lord, Luke says, when "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them." After which, "he vanished from their sight" (v. 31).

These two disciples did exactly as Mary Magdalene and the other women had done. They rushed back to

Jerusalem to tell the 11 Apostles. But by that time the Apostles and the others had already heard the news. They said to the two disciples, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon (Peter)" (v. 34).

Many of the early Christians were at first confused about whether and how the Resurrection applied to them. It was Paul who assured them that they should "not grieve like the rest, who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, so too will God, through Jesus, bring with him those who have fallen asleep" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14).

"And if Christ has not been raised," he admonished skeptics, "then empty is our preaching; empty, too, your faith ... you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (1 Corinthians 15:14, 17-18).

The theological and spiritual stakes are very high indeed here. Easter is not only a time for Easter eggs, candy baskets, bunny rabbits — and religious boilerplate. It is a time for reaffirming our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the cornerstone of Christian faith and of our hope in eternal life.

All else in the "deposit of faith" pales into insignificance alongside it.

Father McBrien is a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame.

Here comes 'the good part' — the Son rises

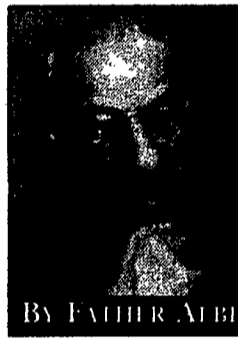
Sunday's Readings: (R3) John 20:1-9; (R1) Acts 10:34, 37-43; (R2) Colossians 3:1-4.

A family was watching a movie of the life of Jesus on television. Their 6-year-old daughter was deeply moved as the movie realistically portrayed Jesus' crucifixion and death. Tears ran down her face as she watched them lay him in a tomb and place a guard outside it. Then suddenly a big smile broke on her face. She sat up in the chair and said with great anticipation, "Now comes the good part."

That is what we celebrate on Easter, the good part: "Jesus Christ is risen today!"

Let us focus on the words of John: "Mary of Magdala came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark." John was just reporting a fact that Mary came to the tomb before daybreak. But darkness could refer to a world without Christ, a world without hope, a world of sin and death, a world where God's promises had been forgotten and God's people felt forsaken. Darkness is much more than the absence of sunlight. Darkness is a spiritual condition in which the presence of God is no longer felt.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. On Friday she had seen her master crucified, his heart pierced with a lance, his body laid in a borrowed tomb. How could this be? This was the man who had come to redeem



BY FATHER ALBERT SHAMON

a word for sunday

Israel. How could this be? She could not understand. Where was God in all this? Was there no one to stop this awful miscarriage of justice? Mary was in the dark, spiritual as well as physical.

Often people come to the tomb of someone they love while it is still dark. Giuseppe Verdi knew about that darkness. It is reflected in his operas. In *Rigoletto*, the ill-starred court jester mourns the death of his beloved wife. In *La Traviata*, the expiring heroine Violetta vows to look after her dear Alfredo from heaven.

Verdi himself had walked the dark corridors of bereavement in his mid-20s. Three years in succession he lost his infant son, then his infant daughter, and finally his devoted wife. In his art Verdi confronted the problem of this final separation from dear ones with prayer. A number of his operas conclude with a prayer for reconciliation and personal

reunion beyond the rupture of death.

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was still dark. But fortunately that is not the end of the story. When she reached the tomb, she found the stone rolled away — and the body gone. What had they done with him? Wonder and fear gripped her soul. Had his enemies stolen his body? Mary rushed to find the disciples. When they confirmed her discovery, she was all the more confused. She stood outside the tomb weeping.

Turning around, she saw a man she supposed to be the gardener. She said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Then it happened. Jesus spoke her name. "Mary!"

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" And she grabbed him. Jesus said, "Stop holding on to me, go to my brothers and tell them I am going to my Father."

Mary went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!"

Prophetic the play on words, but it is appropriate. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb while it was still dark, but now the "Son" was risen. Isn't that the message of Easter? In the midst of our darkness the Son always rises. Because he does, there is hope. There is promise. The Son of God has risen.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. But the darkness

was soon overcome with light. We must remember that. Family concerns. Problems at work. Anxiety about health and the future. The loss of someone you love. Easter promises us more than stars in our darkness. Easter promises us that in the midst of our deepest darkness the Son rises to overwhelm the darkness forever.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark — but the darkness did not remain. The dawn broke. God's Son had risen.

Father Shamon is administrator of St. Isaac Jogues Chapel, Fleming, N.Y.

Daily Readings

Monday, April 8

Acts 2:14, 22-33;

Matthew 28:8-15

Tuesday, April 9

Acts 2:36-41; John 20:11-18

Wednesday, April 10

Acts 3:1-10; Luke 24:13-35

Thursday, April 11

Acts 3:11-26; Luke 24:35-48

Friday, April 12

Acts 4:1-12; John 21:1-14

Saturday, April 13

Acts 4:13-21; Mark 16:9-15

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