

“The Rabbi from Nazareth”  
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So, it's Easter again. 31% of the world's population – more than two billion people will observe what they believe, more or less, is the anniversary of the resurrection of their hero, Jesus of Nazareth, to life, three days after his death by crucifixion roughly 2,000 years ago. [To be accurate, actually, the 12% of Christians who are members of the Orthodox Church - Greek, Russian, etc., will not be celebrating Easter until next Sunday, since they operate on a different calendar.] It should also be noted that Jesus is the second most important figure to the world's 1.8 billion Muslims. This is not a bad achievement for a Rabbi who grew up in a small village in Palestine, and whose public life lasted for roughly three years.

I said “believe more or less” because there are different degrees to which Christians take the resurrection stories literally, but a vastly predominant number of Christian leaders espouse the belief that the resurrection is the most important element in Christianity, without which it would not exist.

[how do we know?]

I was intrigued to find that there are 1,963 books on Jesus in the St Lawrence University library catalog. Amazon claims to have 200,000 books about him in their listings. That is fascinating in the context of the agreement by many scholars that we do not have enough hard information about Jesus to compose a decent obituary. What that means, of course, is that the authors of all those books apply a great deal of creative imagination in filling in the gaps between the few details we have.

There is a computer saying which I will not repeat literally because of the offense of its language in this context, but its point is that the quality of what you put into a computer limits the quality of what comes out of it. The quality of the product cannot exceed the quality of the raw materials. The computer cannot correct the flaws in the data it has to work with.

What are the raw materials when it comes to what we know about Jesus? Obviously, there were no video cameras, or tape recorders, or lap top computers to follow him around and record his words and deeds. In fact, there were limited materials for writing, and besides, to the degree that the Rabbi was talking about the end of the world as it was known, there was little motivation to keep records.

Some people were so moved by his teaching and the power of his personality that a number of them left their work and families behind in order to follow him. Once he was taken from them, some of them went on spreading the teachings they had heard from him as they remembered them. And some of those who heard their stories shared them with people who, moved by them, shared them with others. And you know how precise transmission by word of mouth is.

It was something like 60 years after the crucifixion that the first attempt was made to write down the “good news” of Jesus' ministry by someone who took the name Mark, which was the name of one of the original followers, but the author was not he.

My Bible professor at St Lawrence, Morton Scott Enslin, was the editor of the prestigious Journal of Biblical Literature - which is to say, he was a recognized Bible scholar.

Morton had been a professor at a Baptist seminary, but they had cleaned house of the liberals on the faculty and, somehow, the Theological School at St. Lawrence was able to grab him.

In preparation for this sermon, I delved into several scholarly books about Jesus, before I returned to Morton's classic, "The Prophet from Nazareth," which is far better than I remembered its being. He wrote not only intelligently, but poetically.

About the composition of the gospels, he observed:

*When the gospels were written, apparently during the last thirty years of the first century, the authors, no one of whom was himself an eyewitness of the events he was seeking to record, were dependent upon materials which had accumulated through the years of mission preaching. As zealous followers of the crucified prophet sought to continue his work of proclaiming the momentary coming of the expected kingdom. Among these materials were undoubtedly reminiscences of things he had said and done, preserved however, not for future biographers, but because they were useful for missionary preachers . . .*

*Then, as now, such materials were not preserved unchanged. To fit and point a particular insistence, an illustrative story may well need some adaptation. Thus, the material changed. . . . Thus, in short, the religion **of** Jesus was speedily transformed into the religion **about** Jesus.*

Why are there four gospels? Well, the understanding of the Jesus story as it came down to the writer we refer to as Mark was somewhat different from the understanding of the writer we call Matthew, so possibly a decade later, Matthew, while clearly using Mark's work as his base, made modifications to make the story fit his understanding. And then, a decade after that, the one we call Luke, who certainly had Mark at hand and possibly Matthew, and most scholars believe, a third source referred to by scholars as "Q," which was the source of most of the parables, made further modifications. And then there was John who had a very different understanding of whom the Rabbi had been.

And then we add to the mix the letters attributed to Paul, which predated the gospels, but which made no attempt to present an orderly record of Jesus' ministry and had an entirely different perspective on him.

These are the raw materials which represent virtually everything we know about the Rabbi from Nazareth, and serve as the basis of the teachings of the Christian Church and of the thousands of books seeking to help us understand the writer's understanding of the meaning of his ministry.

#### [Jesus the Jew]

What many, if not most, Christians fail to understand is that Jesus was born, preached, and was crucified as a Jew who was addressing Jews. Jesus was not interested in founding a new religion. Nothing we have any record of his having said suggests anything but Jewish ideas. He was not in step with how the Jewish laws were being practiced in everyday life and certainly not with the hierarchy which ran the all-important Temple in Jerusalem, but he engaged in trying to perfect them, not supercede them.

When someone comes along who talks about the injustices of the current culture, he or she is not likely to attract a following among those who are benefitting from the status quo. And so, Jesus' appeal was mostly to the downtrodden, the servants, the laborers, tax collectors, and prostitutes. This, of course, made him suspect in the eyes of the community leaders.

One of the images that came to mind as I contemplated this sermon was, what if there were a world wide cataclysm which left only a remnant of the human race and the only historical materials that survived from this era were fragments of the writings of those who see the present occupant of the American White House as having been chosen by God to lead the most powerful nation in the world. Believe me, I am not suggesting any parallels between Jesus and that contemporary personage, but my point is that devoted followers are frequently not good sources of perspective regarding their hero.

If we are concerned about the stability of our world today, the insecurity we experience pales in comparison to that faced by the people of Judea among whom Jesus lived two thousand years ago. While their religious tradition told them that theirs was a land chosen for them by the creator of the universe. They were his chosen people, and yet, they were actually vassals of the Roman empire. They were allowed a measure of independence, but its continuation was dependent upon the maintenance of stability, law and order. The Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, was a fairly skilled administrator. He made some missteps, but he learned to accommodate to the sensibilities of the Jewish population. He is given a bad rap because of the role he played in the crucifixion of Jesus.

We do not have a great deal of insight into what Jesus thought about himself. We know there were those who saw him, even at the time, as a religious prophet, as a spiritual leader, as a social reformer, and as a revolutionary who wanted to help his people overthrow Roman rule.

[Palm Sunday]

We are told in the gospels that he warned his apostles that he was likely to die soon, but it appears that they did not take this seriously. The entrance we are told he made into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was certainly not designed to reassure the authorities. It is depicted as a major parade with Jesus leading on the back of a donkey. It appears that his reputation as a leader of the masses had preceded him, and then this! Morton Enslin wrote:

*Jesus' entry into Jerusalem sealed his doom. Rumors of the rabble-rousing, demon possessed prophet with his message of the overthrow of law and order – exaggerated and garbled rumors and their credence by those in authority are no invention of the modern world – had preceded him. . . . That a demonstration such as is reported in ascending elaboration by all four evangelists, with the prophet riding into the city, would have been tolerated is far from likely. . . . To ride in would be a claim to kingly power. That Rome would have tolerated it is utterly unlikely. . . .*

*Nonetheless . . . [Dr. Enslin acknowledged] there may be a solid kernel of fact, notably, the acclaim which the prophet received from pilgrims and city dwellers alike.*

That of course, was nothing in comparison to Jesus' disruption of the order at the Temple when he charged in and overturned the tables of the moneychangers. Having money changers in the Temple sounds pretty tacky, but the reality was that pilgrims were expected to give money, in the traditional coins which were no longer in common circulation, and to present animals for sacrifice that were in every way perfect. The only way to be certain that the sacrifices would be acceptable was to purchase them on site - trying to travel with them would risk their being injured in some way.

Scholars disagree as to whether the cleansing of the Temple was something that actually happened as the story is told, or whether it is a dramatic element that later followers believed must have happened to explain the severity of the response by the authorities.

As the story goes, Jesus was arrested some nights later at the garden at Gesthsemane allegedly when he was identified by his follower Judas Iscariot. According to the tradition, Jesus had warned his disciples that they would desert him when the crisis came, and when Peter insisted that he would never run, Jesus predicted to Peter that he would deny knowing Jesus three times, as he did.

[By the way, one of the fascinating things I encountered in my reading was the assertion by Bruce Chilton, author of **Rabbi Jesus: an Intimate Biography**, that when, during the Last Supper, Jesus said, "This is my blood" over the wine, and "This is my body," over the bread:

*He cannot have meant "Here are my personal body and blood" – that interpretation makes sense only after Jesus' movement distinguished itself from Judaism. The radical meaning of his words was that wine and bread replaced the sacrifice in the Temple, and that was a direct challenge to established ritual practice in Israel.*

I have not encountered that interpretation elsewhere and it clearly is not reflected in Roman Catholic practice, but that could be because of later Gentile influence in the later community of the followers of Jesus.

[trial and crucifixion]

Great detail is offered in the gospels about the supposed trial of Jesus before the Sanhedran, the Jewish religious court, and his appearance before Pontius Pilate. Quotations are offered as if a court reporter had recorded them. It is fairly clear that the Jewish authorities motivated the arrest and wanted the troublemaker done away with. They did not have the power to impose the death penalty. Pontius Pilate, needing to maintain order really had little choice - he was damned if he did and damned if he didn't. It is highly unlikely that the masses were privy to any of the decision making. It was not "the Jews" at large, but the leadership of the Temple that called for Jesus' death.

Morton Enslin suggested:

*Those today who have a hatred of revolutionary violence and a feeling of responsibility for keeping intact the "American way of life" [he was writing decades before "Making America Great Again" became what it is today] they may well thank God that it was not their fate to have lived in Jerusalem in AD 29. Without the vista of the past nineteen hundred years, it could well have been that some of the most orthodox today, had they been there then, would have approved the sorry verdict.*

We look at crucifixion as an extreme form of capital punishment. I certainly do not want to suggest it was humane, but the reality is that it was common in the Roman Empire. It was common for those crucified to last for a long time, but the gospels say Jesus died at 3:00. The Gospels differ as to his final words. That evening he was taken from the cross and, the tradition says, was buried in a tomb on Good Friday.

[resurrection?]

Sunday morning, when Mary Magdalene and Mary the Mother of James, and Salome went to the tomb to anoint the body, they found that the rock blacking the tomb had been rolled back and, according to Mark's Gospel,

*As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not*

*here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you. So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

That is believed to have been the original ending to Mark's Gospel, although additional verses about his appearances, including the instruction to "go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" were, at some point, appended to the original ending.

Two things to be aware of:

First is that at that time, the idea of resurrection of a divine leader was hardly rare – it could almost be called a requirement in order to be taken seriously. Dionysus, Persephone, Osiris, Odin, Ganesh, Lemminkainen [a Finnish hero], Tammuz, Krishna, Quetzalcoatl, and Attis, are just 10 of the many leaders who were said to have been resurrected. When the disciples decided to go beyond the Jewish community to recruit new followers, it was not easy to sell a hero who had been executed as a common rabble-rouser. In keeping with what I quoted Morton Enslin earlier as pointing out about how the stories developed, it is not accusing them of prevaricating to suggest that the stories of resurrection became attached to the legends of Jesus.

Second: It is amazing to contemplate how the small band of followers of the Rabbi from Nazareth not only survived the early years after his crucifixion, but, as Bart Ehrman has suggested, followed a path from "Forbidden Religion to a Triumph." It is not hard to see why Christians insist that it must be the work of divinity.

[success]

The majority of the early followers were Jews, but eventually the Jewish community rejected them as being too far out – the real Messiah could not have come and gone as Jesus had. Ehrman points out:

*Most Jews absolutely rejected the message, and they didn't think it was simply wrong. They thought it was somewhat ludicrous. Jews who were expecting a Messiah had a variety of understandings of what that Messiah might be . . . Jesus, on the other hand was a crucified criminal who was executed for crimes against the state. To call Jesus the Messiah struck most Jews as completely crazy.*

There came a time when the followers of Jesus, even those who still viewed themselves as Jews, were expelled from the Jewish community. This is a source of much of the hostility that Christianity ended up having toward the faith that Jesus had proclaimed.

The disciples found much more fertile ground among the pagan communities. It is commonly taught that the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine was the real boost that Christianity, as it had come to be known, profited from. Ehrman, who formerly believed that, says that as a result of his studies, he has come to the realization that it was only a matter of time before Rome would have recognized Christianity because it was growing so rapidly. He attributes the growth of the sect to its message of love and equality and justice and care for the oppressed. It was that message that was, in his eyes, responsible for the growth of the Christian Church.

[the "real" triumphal entry]

But I want to jump back to the time immediately following the crucifixion. Here is where I find some of the most powerful insights of Morton Enslin's perspective. He wrote:

*At the time of his arrest, the disciples had fled in panic back to Galilee. Beneath the stories in the gospels this fact is still to be discerned. The bottom had dropped from life. Their house of cards had collapsed. Their dreams and hopes were over . . . Then something happened. In the place of bleak despair there was a new and victorious confidence. But was it really new? . . . They "saw the Lord." Indeed yes; but was it the one with nail-pierced hands, or was it the one with whom they had lived and labored? Did they not see him as he had stood by the side of the grief-stricken mother and had brought comfort? As he had faced the haughty leaders and, undaunted had challenged them to their faces? As he had gathered the children about him? . . . As he had shared their evening meals?.. . . Had not Jesus built himself, unbeknownst to them and perhaps to him, into them so completely that he was even then living in them? . . . It would have been a greater miracle had they not seen him for he was even then living in them.*

*The body which when taken down from the cross had been placed in a rock-hewn tomb, was not Jesus of Nazareth. The real Jesus was not the flesh and blood and the bone and the skin, but that something which had the power to reproduce itself in them, that lived in them. . . .*

*With this confidence, a confidence not built upon ecstatic visions – though it may well have led to them – but upon the solid and unshakeable foundation which had been wrought in them through their companionship with him, they eventually returned to Jerusalem to a task they saw was still unfinished . . .*

*Through the years, Christians have commemorated what they style the "Triumphal Entry." Instead [Morton Enslin asserted, for him the Triumphal Entry], is the scene that no one has ever sought to describe, when the little group of men who had found themselves, with none to hail their advent, re-entered with radiant confidence, the city which had crucified their Master, and which might well do the same to them.*

*.... None of us, despite our easy recital of the Apostles' Creed, expects at our death to be raised after three days supernaturally from the grave, That such a vindication of his work was necessary to compel men [and women] to see the significance of his life, appears to me to strike an alien note and to paralyze us in our attempt to perform the tasks in our day which he has called us to do. But if we can believe that that drive to life, that universal and unsatisfied longing which pervades and dominates the universe to its core, and which through the ages men [and women] have called God, reveals itself in all its power and potential in [those] who grasp it unafraid and seek to wrest its secrets, learn its laws, obey its rules; that within us there is a power of discernment which enables us to distinguish things which differ and to prefer things which excel, as we do the tasks to which we are called – then in sober fact, our house is built upon a rock which can never be shaken.*

Most of you know that I not only do not consider myself a Christian, and that I identify as a Humanist rather than a theist. But that does not deter me from resonating with what Dr. Enslin wrote about that "drive to life" that within us there is a power of discernment which enables us to distinguish things which differ and to prefer things which excel, as we do the tasks to which we are called – then in sober fact, our house is built upon a rock which can

*never be shaken.* It does not trouble me that he identifies that drive, that power within us with what he calls God, although I would not, I can still relate to that vision of humanity.

[“Reclaiming Jesus”]

Similarly, my attention was powerfully grabbed by a document that a group of prominent Evangelical elders, some of whom I know, developed on an Ash Wednesday retreat. It is, I believe an enlargement upon the “power of discernment” of which Morton Enslin wrote. Again, their frame of reference as Evangelical Christians is not mine, but I found their message to be powerful.

*The word “evangelical” has its origin in the word “evangel” from Luke 4:16, in which Jesus first announced his mission at Nazareth by saying: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor [the word here for “good news” in the original Aramaic language is evangel]. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”*

*That is the word from which we get the words “evangelism” and “evangelical.” But there is hardly a text in Scripture that would be less associated with the word “evangelical” in the United States today. Or as the president of an evangelical seminary said to me recently, “Evangelicalism (and he meant white evangelicalism) is destroying the evangel.”*

The Evangelical Elders presented their “Confession of Faith in a Time of Crisis” entitled “Reclaiming Jesus” on Palm Sunday in a full and abbreviated version. I am going to share the abbreviated version with you, although I commend the full one for your attention, [ReclaimingJesus.org] I have not filtered out the theology that lies at the core of their statement, I trust your ability to translate. They wrote:

*We are living through perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches. We believe the soul of the nation and the integrity of faith are now at stake.*

*It is time to be followers of Jesus before anything else—nationality, political party, race, ethnicity, gender, geography. Our identity in Christ precedes every other identity.*

*When politics undermines our theology, we must examine that politics. The church’s role is to change the world through the life and love of Jesus Christ. The government’s role is to serve the common good by protecting justice and peace. When that role is undermined by political leadership, faith leaders must stand up and speak out. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state.”*

*It is often the duty of Christian leaders, especially elders, to speak the truth in love to our churches and to name and warn against temptations, racial and cultural captivities, false doctrines, and political idolatries—and even our complicity in them. We do so here with humility, prayer, and a deep dependency on the grace and Holy Spirit of God.*

*Jesus is Lord. That is our foundational confession. If Jesus is Lord, then Caesar was not—nor any other political ruler since. We pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy*

*will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Our faith is personal but never private, meant not only for heaven but for this earth.*

*Applying what “Jesus is Lord” means today is the message we commend as elders to our churches. We pray that we, as followers of Jesus, will find the depth of faith to match the danger of our political crisis. The present crisis calls us to go deeper—deeper into our relationship to God; into our relationships with each other, especially across racial, ethnic, and national lines; and into our relationships with the most vulnerable, who are at greatest risk.*

*We need to recover the power of confessing our faith. Lament, repent, and then repair. If Jesus is Lord, there is always space for grace. We believe it is time to speak and to act in faith and conscience, not because of politics, but because we are disciples of Jesus Christ—to whom be all authority, honor, and glory. He is the light in our darkness. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life” (John 8:12).*

They then offer six statements of belief followed by therefores which reflect the impact of those beliefs.

*I. WE BELIEVE*

*each human being is made in God’s image and likeness. Racial bigotry is a brutal denial of the image of God in some of the children of God.*

*THEREFORE, WE REJECT*

*the resurgence of white nationalism and racism in our nation on many fronts, including the highest levels of political leadership. We reject white supremacy and commit ourselves to help dismantle the systems and structures that perpetuate white preference and advantage. Any doctrines or political strategies that use racist resentments, fears, or language must be named as public sin.*

*II. WE BELIEVE*

*we are one body. In Christ, there is to be no oppression based on race, gender, Identity, or class.*

*THEREFORE, WE REJECT*

*misogyny, the mistreatment, violent abuse, sexual harassment, and assault of women being further revealed in our culture and politics, including in our churches, and the oppression of any other child of God.*

*III. WE BELIEVE*

*how we treat the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger, the sick, and the prisoner is how we treat Christ himself.*

*THEREFORE, WE REJECT*

*the language and policies of political leaders who would debase and abandon the most vulnerable children of God. We strongly deplore the growing attacks on immigrants and refugees; we won’t accept the neglect of the well-being of low-income families and children.*

*IV. WE BELIEVE*

*that truth is morally central to our personal and public lives. Jesus promises, “You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free” (John 8:32).*

*THEREFORE, WE REJECT*

*the practice and pattern of lying that is invading our political and civil life. The normalization of lying presents a profound moral danger to the fabric of society.*

**V. WE BELIEVE**

*that Christ's way of leadership is servanthood, not domination. We support democracy, not because we believe in human perfection, but because we do not.*

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT**

*any moves toward autocratic political leadership and authoritarian rule. We believe authoritarian political leadership is a theological danger threatening democracy and the common good—and we will resist it.*

[and finally]

**VI. WE BELIEVE**

*Jesus when he tells us to go into all nations making disciples. Our churches and our nations are part of an international community whose interests always surpass national boundaries. We in turn should love and serve the world and all its inhabitants rather than to seek first narrow nationalistic prerogatives.*

**THEREFORE, WE REJECT**

*"America first" as a theological heresy for followers of Christ. While we share a patriotic love for our country, we reject xenophobic or ethnic nationalism that places one nation over others as a political goal.*

*[I agree]*

I fully agree that we are facing "*perilous and polarizing times as a nation, with a dangerous crisis of moral and political leadership at the highest levels of our government and in our churches.*" At a time like this, we need to reach out to those who, while coming from a different path, a different theological basis, seek the same destination that we do. On this Easter Sunday, it seems appropriate that we celebrate the memory of the Rabbi from Nazareth by taking seriously the goals which some of his followers have so powerfully articulated as coming from their understanding of who he was and what a commitment to his principles means to them. I encourage you to go to "**Reclaiming Jesus.org**" and consider how we can offer our support for their goals without necessarily sharing their theology. We all get by with a little help from our friends.

Happy Easter and Happy Passover.