

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

EASTER DAY

SUNDAY 12 APRIL 2009

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Mark 16: 1-8

"Reading Mark with Tolstoy's Novel, *Resurrection*"

"That night an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov, not so much because he entered new conditions of life, but because everything that had happened to him from that time on was endowed with an entirely different meaning for him. How this new chapter of his life will end, the future will show."

*The end-words in Tolstoy's **Resurrection**, (dated, 1899)*

Introduction

Though people in their hundreds of thousands had tried their hardest to disfigure that little corner of the earth where they crowded themselves together, by driving stones into the ground so that nothing could grow, weeding out every blade of vegetation, filling the air with fumes of coal and gas, cutting down the trees and driving away every beast and bird – spring, however, was still spring, even in the town.

The sun shone warm, the grass, wherever it had not been scraped away, revived and sprang up green not only on the narrow strips of lawn on the boulevards but between the paving-stones as well as. The birches, the poplars, and the wild cherry unfolded their sticky and fragrant leaves, the swelling buds were bursting on the lime-trees; crows, sparrows, and pigeons, filled with the joy of spring, were getting their nests ready; the flies, warmed by the sunshine, buzzed [жужжали, transliterated as, jzujzally] along the walls. All were glad, the plants, the birds, the insects, and the children. But people [Russian: люди means people, English translators mistranslate using patriarchal terms: "men"] – older, grown-up people – never left off cheating and tormenting themselves and one another. People [Again, люди, means people, not "men"] considered that what was sacred, important and valuable was not this spring morning, not the beauty of God's world, given to all creatures to participate in, this beauty which inclines the heart to peace, to harmony, and to love. No, what they esteemed as sacred and important were their own devices for wielding power over each other.

Leo Tolstoy, *Resurrection*, Penguin, 1966, page 19; my own translations are suggested where they occur, and made further changes in places.

1. With this realist parable, Leo Tolstoy introduces us to his novel, *Resurrection*. It functions like a very short version of the novel.

The innocent, represented in his female character, Maslova, are abused by "the whole fabric of society, the Law courts, the prison system, and in particular, the Church." (Rosemary Edmonds, *Resurrection*, 8) People of power and noble birth, represented by his main male character, Nekhlyudov, live self-oriented lives, living at the expense of the powerless and innocent.

Nekhlyudov seduces Maslova when she is a young servant girl. Years later he encounters her as a prostitute, in court on a charge of theft. This book explores the process of dealing with guilt and conscience, with the process of resurrection of fallen humanity. But the process of entering a new life was filled with anxieties, false starts, insincerities and learnings.

Tolstoy believed that this kind of fictional work should be used to present his message and teaching. He wrote that the story acts like a clown at a fair luring the public inside the tent where the real play is performed. (Rosemary Edmonds, *Resurrection*, 8) And what does he think is required for a just and harmonious society? Resurrection! Though not the religious kind, presented as an other worldly experience.

2. Our story in Mark 16: 1-8 is similar to Tolstoy's intentions. Mark presents the three women, who wake early to go to the tomb where they believe the dead Jesus is buried, as the innocent for whom the whole of life was sacred. Those absent from this scene were the religious leaders, Pilate and the soldiers, the crowd for whom "the sacred and important were their own devices for wielding power over each other".

Good Friday had its final word from them for Jesus the heretic and criminal. The religious and political courts conspired to betray the innocent and the truth. People in Jerusalem are now waking up to enter their own normal routines. As far as this life-world is concerned, nothing has changed!

These three faithful, grieving women are responding to the unjust, tragic death of their leader and the seeming failure of their cause. Our story begins with these women who approach the tomb. They come prepared to honour the dead, not the living. They expect a closed tomb, sealed by an immovable stone. Grief and failure narrow vision.

3. But here we see that the Gospel writer's intention is similar to Tolstoy's, though also very different.

Mark wants us to see the bigger picture which embraces and transforms the total lives of these women. And, Mark wants us to realise that all human lives can be embraced and transformed by unexpected new creation and resurrection life.

Even as they start out contained by the tragedy of recent days, Mark's symbols give us signs that new life is with them. As Marie Sabin writes, "Symbolic of a new creation, the women come 'very early in the morning on the first day of the week. . . . on the rising of the sun' (16.2). "Women Transformed. The ending of Mark is the beginning of wisdom." Marie Sabin, *Cross Currents*, Summer 1998, Vol. 48 Issue 2.

What they think is an insurmountable obstacle, such as the very large stone to the grave, is already rolled away. The impossible and unexpected has occurred. This opening allows them to enter spaces of new life and surprise.

Only when they enter this dark space can they encounter the messenger who tells them that death has been transformed into new life. If they avoided the hard things of life, they would never have received the message of hope.

Jesus is now identified by the young man, sitting in the tomb in the place where Jesus should have been, as "the crucified": "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here." (16:6) The event of resurrection is beyond our perception. What God has done is a mystery defying human understanding. It can only be believed.

Yet, resurrection is not just an event we believe in. It is an event we participate in and live out in hope. The messenger tells the women, “get up”, as Jesus had told the people he healed during his life, which meant, rise up into a new life. For the women this means to go and share the news of Easter life with the other disciples; and prepare to meet the crucified Jesus where you first met him, where their they all started, in Galilee.

The one who has died now returns. His purpose and identity was revealed on the cross. As Ched Myers writes:

The full revelation of he Human One has resulted in neither triumphal victory for the community (as the disciples had hoped), nor the restored Davidic kingdom (as the rebels had hoped), nor the tragic failure and defeat... It has resulted in nothing more and nothing less than the regeneration of the messianic mission... The “invitation” by Jesus, via the young man, to follow him to Galilee, is the third and last call to discipleship. (*Binding the Strong Man*, 399)

4. What do the women do in this experience? They escape this space as quickly as the enter it. They are overwhelmed and traumatised and run away and say nothing.

What is this distancing about? Do they feel anxious for their own safety if they start talking about Jesus who has just been executed as a traitor and criminal? Harriet G Lerner in her book *The Dance of Intimacy* writes, “*distancing is actually a way of managing very intense feelings*”. Especially, she suggests in her book, dealing with family and community dynamics.

We know that they eventually adjust to this shock and do begin to live out their resurrection faith, following the crucified-risen Christ, in acts of justice, mercy and goodness.

Conclusion

To conclude, I want to return to Tolstoy’s novel, which provides some profound insights about the process of resurrection, or as he describes it, of being re-born to lead a more meaningful life. And I want to add some insights from Harriet Lerner.

Practicing a resurrection life is a life-long process of learning and growing to understand ourselves and humanity. Nekhlyudov’s anguished discovery of how he had ruined Maslova’s life produced a desire to purge his soul by using his social power to secure her a pardon. Then he wanted to marry her and follow her to Siberia. She refuses: “You want to save yourself through me. You had your pleasure from me in this world, and you want to get your salvation through me in the next world”.

We are all capable of doing good to others on our own terms. Not only does this mean we dishonour the rights of the other, but we remain unaware of what kind of person, or self, we are ourselves. Who am I and what desires motivate me to act like this? These are questions of spirituality. What new life has Nekhlyudov really gained in respect of his self-and-other understanding? As Harriet Lerner would ask: is he overfunctioning, underfunctioning, fighting, pursuing, distancing, child-focusing or other-focusing (p34).

Tolstoy’s novel tells the story about a person in whom new life was growing only as he honestly engaged with the complex and contradictory realities of his deceptions, manipulations as well as acts of love for the other, in acts of respectful justice and true self-giving.

He concludes his novel:

“That night an entirely new life began for Nekhlyudov, not so much because he entered new conditions of life, but because everything that had happened to him from that time on was endowed with an entirely different meaning for him. How this new chapter of his life will end, the future will show”.