

Council for World Mission
Easter Reflections



**The Dominion of Death
is overcome**

(Romans 6:5)

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Resurrection as Life beyond Empire

The Gospels set the death of Jesus in a political framework. Between the four Gospels the three main powers of Jesus's day are named and implicated in his execution. The Roman Empire's power is personified in Pilate and in the crowd's cries for Caesar, (We have no King but the Emperor John 19:15 etc). Caiaphas stands for the Religious Power of the Jewish Sanhedrin and is present with Pilate in all of the accounts. Luke adds Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Judea and the Roman puppet Jewish king. Paul, as a good Roman citizen, de-emphasises the political context of Jesus' death, but depicts the resurrection against a back drop of the Dominion of death, (Romans 5:14, 17, 21, 6:9,12,14). But, this is code of course, dominion is the territory of the Dominus, the Lord, and so Paul describes the risen life as entering the counter dominion of Grace. Western white Christianity has spiritualised and abstracted this in terms of the ontology of death, but the counter claim of the Dominion of Christ's life is rooted in the politics of Empire. The Gospels are not making claims about Life Eternal, the resurrection is about Life Resistant. Jesus is not simply risen in triumph 'oe'r the grave' but in defiance of Caesar and gathers to him a movement which harbours a Spirit of insurrection as well as resurrection.

As a way to further explore Mission in the context of Empire CWM Mission Development has produced a series of reflections on 'stations of the resurrection' as we explore what the appearances of the risen Lord suggest about life beyond Empire. We find in many of these texts the call to create a community with a way of life quite counter to the norms, appetites and claims of Empire. This is apparent for the contemporaries of Jesus under the Roman Empire. But also, for us who live in an Empire of a different sort, where financial, economic, political, social, military and religious power connects across a number of geographies to operate a system in which the rich and powerful profit to extremes because the poor and the planet are exploited to extremes. This Empire, like Rome before it, claims to be the means to peace and prosperity without alternative and resists all rival claims and alternative visions of the world, power and truth. Yet, there is another world, just as there is another way, and we glimpse them as real moments with Jesus in texts like these:

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Easter 2018





1. The Great Commission?

A womanist reading of Matthew 28:9-10

9 Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. 10 Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

Three things struck me when I was reading this text. It is fascinating to observe that Jesus sends women to go and tell his brothers that they will meet him in Galilee. Why women, especially in relations to the resurrection of Jesus? There must be something about Galilee too, I silently ponder. Three ideas namely, "sending" or "commissioning," "women" and "Galilee" frame our meditation.

First, how great is it to send women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee to see Jesus? Is that not a commissioning of women? The irony here is that 'great' is used if not inserted later in this Chapter to qualify Jesus's sending of his disciples to make disciples of all nations (Mt 28: 16-20). Should we not wonder why "greatness" is used in relation to the sending of disciples who are male? Is it not great a sending by Jesus of women to his own disciples? The theology of the "Great Commission," can no longer escape the critique of its use as part of Christianisation, colonisation and conquest in our decolonial times. Therefore, the idea of "greatness" suggests power contestations and the violence inherent in patriarchal terror in the biblical texts.

Second, the very understanding that Jesus's appearance after resurrection was with women cannot escape the qualification of greatness for women in the sending mission of Jesus. Feminists and Womanists have argued in favour of a reading of the Bible on the basis that one of the most important teachings in the Gospels, New the Resurrection of Jesus, is experienced by women first: They are the ones sent to tell the disciples! Theirs, is arguably the 'Great' commission! This marks a beginning of a new community. Last, Jesus meets them in Galilee. The City of the riff-raff, where He comes from himself. People there are those who ultimately became victims of the political and economic systems of the day. He resurrects only to return first to this community, Galilee.

Empire prospers patriarchal visions of human life and community which privilege men and the Church has been at the forefront of baptising this. Jesus' cross and resurrection are a sign of what male power is always capable of, and Jesus' resurrection is the subversion of this, for we see in this text how it is the beginnings of an alternative community founded on the full participation of women, equipped with new eyes to see oppressive elements in the Bible and going out to Galilee, ready to embody the Good News of Life beyond Empire, first told us by these great women.

Prayer:

Gracious God, who makes all things new...Through your resurrection you have created an alternative community. Lord, we confess that we are churches that remain powerful and great! Churches that refuse to be part of the alternative community, where the last are first and the first are last. Empower us to walk in your ways for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Amen.

Fundiswa Kobo,

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2. Resurrection as Life beyond Empire

Emptied tomb - filled minds Mark 16: 1 – 8

But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.”⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The end of the Gospel of Mark has always roused some controversy because we don't meet Jesus and the women run off terrified and tell no one. Hence there are a number of later endings added which seek to harmonise it with the other Gospels, so that through them we encounter the Lord, risen and alive. Yet, for these reflections we stay with the original ending. How does this text offer any sign of Resurrection, let alone resurrection as Life beyond Empire?

Mark is taken to be the earliest Gospel and, it is thought, was written in and for a community of Christians in Rome itself. The members of Mark's community daily inhabited the heart of Empire, lived in the face of its full splendour and power. Most were but slaves and servants in the employ of the Imperial machine, many were Gentiles and some were Jews. It is also quite possible that the Gospel is put together following Nero's persecution of the Christian community in Rome. As these witnesses are martyred it becomes urgent to capture the story which empowered their dissidence and resistance.

So, why no appearance by the risen Lord, the triumphant Son of God? These conditions surely call for a depiction of the uprising by the counter Emperor, the Lord, Kyrios, the *Dominus*. Isn't this what would sustain a rebel people? The knowledge that *their* leader is the rightful King. That Jesus is *Dominus* not Nero Claudius Caesar Augustus? Indeed, the Centurion who presides over the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth confesses him: 'Truly, the Son of God', (15:39). What did that mean?

Mark's community know Imperial power from the underside, from the weight of its power on their necks. They know well the domination of those who claim the title *Dominus* and so they are not quick to ascribe this title to Jesus at the end. The Centurion's acclamation, his *evangelion*, hangs heavy in the air until the angel quietly counters and corrects him, '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. 'Jesus of Nazareth'.

The title Son of God and Messiah has been used in the preceding texts of the Gospel but at the conclusion of the drama the angel announces him simply as Jesus of Nazareth. A community made up of the dominated, whose identities and dignities were daily denied by the domestic and military hierarchies of Empire, held on to a vision of life beyond Empire where identity and dignity were respected and honoured. In the secret community of Christians in Rome they were who they were, not slaves or servants, but 'brother' or 'sister' and most importantly 'children of God', (Romans 8:15). These Christians feared a loss of identity through aping the terms and hierarchies of Imperial power. They create an alternative community in the midst of the graveyards of Empire, and they don't reference the empire other than in ironic subversive terms.

The ironic subversive nature of this community is most clearly revealed in the Resurrection story Mark tells. We should take the angel at his word, go to Galilee. But, the hearers of the Gospel live in Rome, how do they go to Galilee, indentured workers as they are? The only way for them and for us, is to return to the start of the story, where Jesus appears in Galilee. The resurrection demands a re-reading of the story, constant re-readings of the story. The reason?

To fully understand who this Jesus of Nazareth is and how he may be followed. Only then can the delicious irony of a centurion-executioner calling Jesus 'the Christ' makes sense. (Forgive him for he knows not what he is saying)

The Marcan angel seems to be telling us that only with de-colonised minds can the church even recognise Jesus of Nazareth, and only when our minds are de-colonised and Jesus recognised not as *uber* Ceasar but as de-Caesar can a credible counter-Imperial community arise. Immersed in the narratives of Jesus of Nazareth the emptiness of Imperial rhetoric and logic becomes clearer and clearer. Empire is a Tomb, and the tomb is empty! Step like Jesus, towards Jesus, out of the tomb into a counter world with its ominous terrifying transforming new dawn.

Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth
send us to Galilee!
Backwater town, a million miles from Rome
and its power and prestige.
Send us to the places from where
no one thinks any good comes,
that at the margins of power, wealth and dominion
Our minds may be enlightened
Our hearts be inspired
Our spirits empowered
To see you are alive and amongst us
Ready to make all things new.
Alleluia!

Peter Cruchley

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3. I Am; Revealed

Reflections on Luke 24: 12 – 33

So he went in to stay with them. 30 When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. 31 And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.

I Am; Revealed

We walked wearily
Along a seven mile journey
Speaking of things we'd seen
Things He'd done-
He's done.
Downcast
We walked, with a world-wide weight
Like the one He carried cross His bleeding body.
His body clothed with lacerations
From the brutal leather thongs
His crown a brier of thorns
Pressed through skin
Penetrating skull
We remembered Him enduring
Stretched from one end to another
Pieces of flesh hanging
'Take my spirit.' -His seventh saying.
Our wounds oozed sadness and despair.
Our minds shackled by fear.
We walked; us two,
A pained pair

We walked
Remembering His promises of mansions
Recalling His stories of temples and kingdoms
But He was just another-
Another brother bites the dust
Another Prophet paying the price for provoking the Powerful, the Priests and Pilate; the Pontius
Now there's none to liberate us
No Saviour; only Sadducees
No Protector; only Pharisees
No Messiah; only the Monarchy,
No, he hadn't come!
He wasn't the one.
Our redeemer relinquished by the Romans
Israel's Hope hacked by Herod
Betrayed by Brother Judas
Accused by Chief Caiaphas-
We walked with broken hearts on the road to Emmaus

Suddenly, two became a chord of three
A stranger joined us on our jaded journey
He talked as though he wasn't from here
But his words made all things clear

We were now on a road of revelation
Beginning with creation
He drew a line through the ages
He unwrapped the ancient pages
'Just as prophesy foretold
Lamb led to the slaughter
Master
Murdered
Ordained
Poured out
To the pain and pleasing of His Father
For the reconciliation of his brothers and sisters
Like a true King
Like a servant
Like a slave
He gave'
As he talked
Our insides burned fiercely
We walked, us three
Inspired by the possibility

And so, we came to Emmaus
But our friend was destined further
We begged him 'sup with us
stay a little longer'
And as he sat he blessed and broke bread
Suddenly our eyes were opened
We now knew he wasn't dead
And true were the things he had spoken
Caught by surprise
He vanished from our eyes
No longer with us in body
Emancipated from empire
Truth revealed in scripture
Resurrected, risen in glory!
In the teaching, in the filling, blessing, breaking and giving;
In Spirit, as human, within
We left for Zion with the good news
Behold, we have seen Him!

Keon Heywood

Keon is a teacher, poet, dancer and performer from Guyana
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and works with 'at risk' and vulnerable young people.

His poem is a reminder that to encounter the resurrection is to imagine alternative realities and hopes to those Empire sells and sanctions and to hopes and yearnings Empire seeks to silence or co-opt.



4. Jesus & Mary in the Garden

John 20: 11 – 18

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb¹² and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.¹³ They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."¹⁴ At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.¹⁵ He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").¹⁷ Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Reflection:

This is a text of struggle, love, resistance, protest and liberation and at the heart of it is the body of a woman – Mary Magdalene. The theological significance of it being a woman who is the first to witness the risen Christ has frustrated the patriarchal Church leaders for centuries, who have sought to instead depict her as a weeping and repentant 'sinner' – thereby dismissing the authority of Mary and the agency of her role within the Church.

Yet her *Rabboni* chose her as his apostolic witness and messenger, in doing so a radical counter-cultural political choice was made that challenged the socio-economic and political powers of the day. Despite androcentric theologies attempting to reconstruct or remove Mary's role in the life of Christ, here it is clear, a woman pushed to the margins who has been silenced by the hierarchies of religio-political structures resists the patriarchy and is the first to witness the risen God.

The resurrection of Christ is therefore fundamentally a communal event that exposes a transformative vision of a society where women are liberated, where their identity is no longer determined by normalised patriarchal structures of social and religious oppression, as Christ reveals an alternative vision of society for the whole community of women and men.

As such, women's bodies are prophetic in both their persecution and their resistance, as Christ has called on them and all who are marginalised to announce the alternative kin-dom in our churches and our society – a life beyond empire. The text is a call to action to journey with Mary in discipleship, as she is the living embodiment of an ideology of resistance, because she knows what it is to suffer, and will not "hold on" (11:17) to the physical body of Christ but will go out into the world to demand that the body of Christ be realised in the kin-dom of heaven, that is shaped by justice, equality and love, a kin-dom that is possible in the here and now and turns upside down the kingdom Empire embodies.

Prayer:

In a world that finds it easy to abuse instead of love,
Woman, why are you crying?

In a world where women and men are divided by race, caste and class,
Woman, why are you crying?

In a world where billions live in poverty whilst the richest 1% gets richer,
Woman, why are you crying?

In a world where there is so much violence against women,
Woman, why are you crying?

My God,
I hear you crying.

Eve Parker

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5. Resurrection: Triumph of God over the Empire

John 20:19-23

Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."

The text from John's gospel, tells us that, after the Resurrection of Jesus, the disciples were panicked by the Roman empire, thinking it would be their turn as followers of Jesus movement to be crucified after Jesus. So, the male disciples hid themselves away in a locked door experience and with a blocked faith. The disciples were living in situations of peace-lessness and fear. And so, Jesus appears to them and pronounces 'Peace be with you'. Jesus' sharing of peace explodes the claims of Empire to offer peace, the *pax Romana*. Thus, Resurrection is a triumph of God over the empire, for till then the empire frightened, threatened and killed people who have spoken against the. But now, God speaks out in Jesus and conquered Empire's death, and thereby defeated its ultimate power in every sense.

At the Cross, the disciples abandoned Jesus, denied him and left him alone to die on the Cross. They had behaved correctly under Empire, had accepted their defeat and the absurdity of their counter claims. Even now, having heard about Jesus' resurrection, it should have been the men disciples who should have had encountered Jesus and taken care of him, but they were afraid of empire and believed it had triumphed as Caesar might claim. The women however, were not willing to let their fear imprison them. They stepped out into a new day and along a new way.

Who should have initiated reconciliation in such a context? On knowing that Jesus was resurrected, the disciples should have made every effort in reconciling with Jesus, trying to search for him and trace the 'dead men walking.' On the contrary, Jesus was the one who initiated this reconciliation, came to meet his friends and not only pronounced peace be with you, but also breathed Holy Spirit on them, the moment of Pentecost according to John. Reconciliation comes with accepting the other as they are. Reconciliation comes with welcoming, with sharing peace, with embracing the frightened community, and instilling in them a sense of hope in overcoming empire. Christian discipleship is a calling to be peacemakers, bringing peace to people who are caught up in situations of fear, distress and unbelief in the times today. Modern forms of empire create fear through violence in all forms and try like Rome to prove their 'natural' domination and supremacy.

The Resurrection of Jesus announces God's resistance to this by overcoming empire in overcoming the death that is the fruit of Empire. Let us commit ourselves this Easter to share a message of hope for life to communities that are caught up under the hegemonies of the empire, for resurrection is a triumph of God against all powers of empire. Allow me to say, the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear, and resurrection aftermaths clears that fear and fills the disciples with that uneasy calmness and leads to peace which passes all understanding of the world. Resurrection is all about celebrating life, new life and renewed life. Easter strengthens us with uneasy peace, with uneasy belief and helps us to recognise and acknowledge that God works in mysterious ways which are part of the unwritten word of God. Fear is the opposite of faith and doubt is not, and may God help us to come closer to God and follow in God's footsteps to be peacemakers and reconcilers. To that end, may the Holy Spirit help us to become committed disciples of Christ in sharing peace to people living in fear, in bringing clarity to those struggling in faith and in recognising the dynamism of God's revelation. Amen.

Raj Bharat Patta

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6. Undressing Thomas: a threat to Orthodoxy

John 20:26-30 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

The maverick Rabbi (Jesus) and his band of radicals who dared to stand-up to the might of Roman occupying power felt the wrath of empire. He was nailed outside the city for taking on empire. Empire will find ways to silence prophetic voices, yet they keep (a)rising!

Consider, the ways Thomas has been (mis)represented over the centuries. A perennial qualifier (doubter or doubting) before or after his name locates him. Try recalling the countless reflections on the John text about Thomas: were the interpretations as predictable as the misrepresentation and stereotyping? Modern day interrogators of our received deposits of faith and those who are cynical about some of the inherited theologies that stifle communities of love and generosity, are also labelled with all sorts of names. Empire habits are part and parcel of Church having perfected the art of drawing lines and policing grace. Who benefits?

Thomas may well be a subversive decolonial voice speaking up, speaking out, standing up, giving voice to hope and igniting new possibilities. So, why then did John represent Thomas as a doubter who later believed. Has it anything to do with the story around Thomas' movement into India (circa AD 52) and/or his eventual scripting of a collection of sayings of Jesus? Was Thomas' too liberal – a heretical threat to an already persecuted Church? It is not insignificant that during this time the Church faithful (with imperial blessing) constructed the canon, creeds and hierarchy and suppressed all other spiritual resources. It was an attempt to shut down dissent and silence those wishing to go against the preferred dominant narrative.

The gospel of Thomas as one such suppressed document was discovered by accident in the caves of Nag Hammadi (December 1945). Considered 'poisonous' by some and as 'blasphemy' by others, Thomas' writing was edged out by John's gospel for a place in the canon. Curiously, the gospel of John (already heavily anti-Jewish) stands alone in discrediting Thomas (another tactic of empire). Why? It was part of a larger plot according to Elaine Pagels: the tension between those who held the view that Jesus taught that the divine light was present in all people and those who, like John, claimed that Jesus had taught that humanity inhabited a profound spiritual darkness that only he (Jesus) could enlighten/save. Hence, John's view of 'salvation only through Jesus' in an attempt to bring closure on Divine grace. While John (gospel) presses on the need to believe, Thomas (gospel) urges a seeking to understand/know God through the capacity within each person. For the latter, the "image of God" is there within everyone to be discovered through one's own efforts. No wonder Thomas is linked to India! John ensured the preservation of the status quo and the dominant narrative. Thomas was a threat to the status quo and a challenge to an arrogant Christianity! Thomas' insight located agency on the divinity in each person. John placed that on the Church and its Councils as the regulators/gatekeepers. The consequences of the latter we still live with.

Jesus said, according to Thomas: If those who lead you say to you, 'Look, the kingdom is in the sky', then the birds of the sky will get there before you....If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will get there before you. And: His disciples said to him, 'When will the resurrection of the dead come, and when will the new world come?' He said to them, 'What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it.' Can we recognise it?

Prayer

God-who-disrupts-our-neat-boundaries, you whose truth is larger than we are, by your presence and through your Spirit enlarge our minds and hearts so that we may seek truth, catch a glimpse of truth, hear truth, learn truth, tell truth, live truth, embody truth - your truth of the way of full life for all.

Michael Jagessar

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7. Breakfast beyond Empire:

Reflections on John 21:9-12

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. 10 Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." 11 So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, 153 of them. And although there were so many, the net was not torn. 12 Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast.

My father and my grandfather were born in a nice little town on the north coast of central Cuba called Caibarién. Although I have very few childhood memories of that place, (which of course I have returned many times as an adult), what I can say is that fishing has generated a whole culture around the town and its peoples.

It's a culture that has to do with smells, tastes, sensations as well as a sense of connectedness, woven together and pulling together, like a net. It is a culture that emerges from the very special tides in the life and spirit of those who live from the sea. Even the fact of being near or far from the sea, positively or negatively shapes the way you settle in every place. To live and to grow in a culture like this one is something that you don't lose on the way.

I need the sea and its power, tides and spirit to feel fully alive. So, we can imagine that the influence of similar tides, cultures and the traditions are evident within Jesus' movement of fisherfolk. So, they retreat from the urban power structures of the Empire and the Temple to the free spirit of the sea.

In this passage, the link, 'the tide', in the centre of this gathering, is 'the Risen'. And he is preparing breakfast for his friends! There is one special detail in this narrative. The story tells us that the net was full of fish so that they could not get it out because of the weight. Even though many, the net was not torn. The miracle of this story is not in the fishing itself. Casting a net into the sea is a ritual that begins with the magic of the ones who weaves it and it ends with the expertise of the one who casts it into the sea. You have to roll it up and carefully throw it in a way that it spreads through the air majestically then falling precisely on the surface so it will sink with not too much noise so you do not scare the fish.

It is certainly an art. But everything starts in the very fabric of the 'network', in the way the net is designed and tightened the knots. So, the most important thing is not so much who pulls the net but the strength of the bonds of the net. Anyone who had had the strength enough to pull in net will fail in their work if the net is not strong enough to contain and sustain the catch.

The story is pointing out the strength of the bonds that are needed for building a community beyond Empires hierarchies and prejudices. It is the subtle confirmation of what has been proclaimed throughout the Gospel of John itself from the very beginning until this epilogue. The essence of the church is in its being a community and the mission of the church is to be a counter Imperial community, proclaim the fruits of a world transformed, a network, web of family under the free spirit of God.

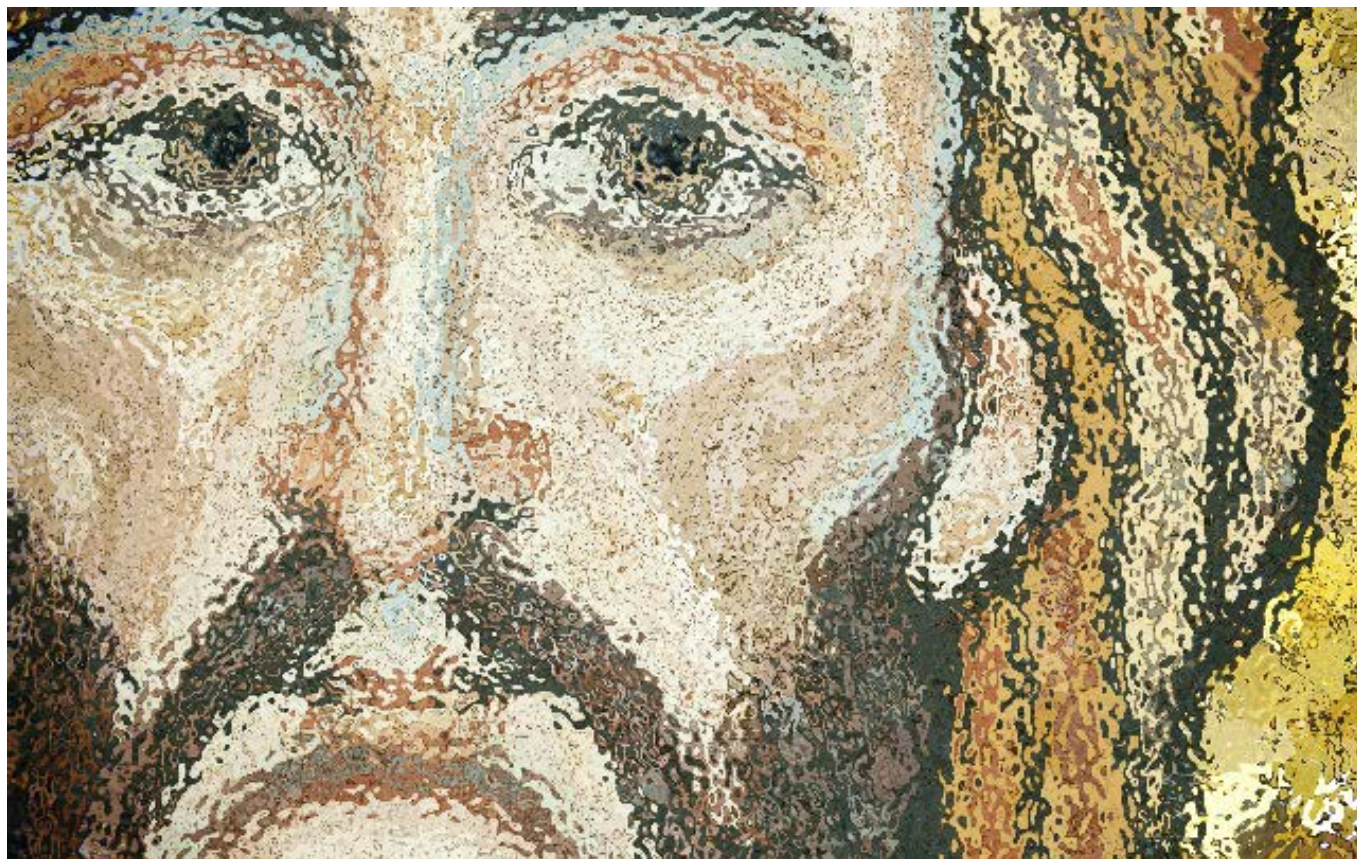
It is our vocation to build a great human community where peace and justice are real in this huge and beautiful household: "the whole inhabited world" with its free and full seas. This story is an invitation to a breakfast beyond Empire's shadow and control, and a reminder we need to honour and harness the interconnections of all those who seek an alternative to Empire. Come then hungry people of a restless spirit, let us bring our fish as the Risen invites us!

Prayer

May this Easter mean for everyone gathering anywhere this Easter, an occasion for renewing our commitment to the risen Christ, who continues to invite us to build a community that gathers around his presence sharing the meal that affirm human solidarity that empowers us for justice in the face of Empire.

Dora Arce Valentin

Incoming Professor of Gender and Theology Matanzas Theological college, Cuba and former Executive Secretary for Justice World Communion of Reformed Churches





8. Teachers of life

Acts 9:1-6

... falling to the ground, Saul heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" 5 And he said, "Who are you, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.

On Easter Christians celebrate life, life that is stronger than death. It is not a naïve celebration, rather, it is a celebration that is fully aware of the powers that stifle, confine and even eradicate life. Still, on Easter we insist to believe that the life, death and resurrection we see in Christ challenges us as followers of Christ to live life to the fullest, to challenge and fight the powers of death as a sign of resurrection.

Paul experienced a conversion that made him enter this alternative mode of being alive. Before his conversion, he was Saul, an agent of death, but after he became Paul, an agent of life. Acts 9: 1-6 describes this conversion.

Liberation is also found in realising how one contributes to oppression. Paul became aware that death was not what he thought it was, nor was life. This was not merely a religious or theological discovery. Empire pervaded all aspects of life and more importantly: faith. Paul's transformation was a step away from Empire and towards the margins. Caesar was portrayed as the saviour, Paul was a Jew and a Roman citizen, but he joined those Jews and Gentiles who followed Christ as their saviour. Being a follower of Christ presented an outlook on life as comprehensive as Caesar's cult. Some scholars of Paul's letters therefore read Paul as counter-imperial: Paul's image of Christ challenges the Roman Empire. An empire that dictates life and death and confines people. Still, Caesar claimed he established peace and security, Paul's understanding of life challenges this: life takes place in the *ekklesia*, the gathering of the faithful existing parallel to the Pax Romana and exposing the Pax Romana as oppressive.

It reminds me of an experience of transformation of my own that took place in Palestine. It was a slower process than Paul's, no light, no falling to the ground, no voice. (Then again, Paul himself does not tell this story and conversions may be slow processes in general). My 'conversion' too was about life. It was about a discovery of my place in the world and the power of a faith that teaches life. I also discovered that Life is not what [modern day] Caesar claims it is. In my own experience, Palestinians pushed me to transform my idea of what life is. As the Palestinian poet Rafeef Ziadeh puts it:

We teach life, sir.

We Palestinians teach life after they have occupied the last sky.

We teach life after they have built their settlements and apartheid walls, after the last skies.

We teach life, sir.

We Palestinians wake up every morning to teach the rest of the world life, sir.

Ziadeh counters the dominant image of Palestinians as violent people, or even lovers of death. In Palestine, my faith and my being-a-theologian transformed. My faith and theology became more real, more alive, more 'indecent' in the sense of critical of notions of 'normal' and 'abnormal'. I became more acutely aware of what oppression looks like in my context: the notions of what is appropriate and what is inappropriate. How ideas on class, gender, sexuality, the colour of our skin and constructions of ethnicity are used to exclude people. I am appalled by the ease by which Muslims are currently excluded from Dutch society and seen as inherently violent and oppressive. I am deeply worried by the ridiculing of transgender persons on national TV. I see more clearly my privileges and the feeling of entitlement that comes with it.

This is a humbling, transformative discovery that is also a happy journey as it makes me more alive.

Being a protestant Christian with Calvinist roots, I tend to read Paul through a de-politicized lens. Paul seemed either a model man of faith or a misogynist, not a person of faith struggling to find life, struggling against injustice, struggling to discover what it means to be a follower of Christ. I do not seek to idealize Paul as a champion of liberation. I do find it much more interesting to be in conversation with Paul about how writings can help us to be attentive to powers of life and death. So that we may see where we ourselves can contribute to the nourishment of life and recognize where we instead endanger or damage life. We are in need of transformation, not just one, but continually. Not because we are evil, but because we deserve life and so does all everyone and everything that is alive.

Life is manifold and bountiful, or it is meant to be that, death is the absence of the manifold and bountiful. Resurrection takes place where people take on responsibility for life. Resurrection takes place when and where people are liberated, both from oppression and from being an oppressor and begin to really live. Reading Paul becomes a quest for life when we as readers dare to see how we can be teachers of life in our own contexts, given the structures of power in which we exist, given the power we have and even the power we lack. And can claim that life lies not in Empire but in the wisdom, wounds and wonder of the communities of places like Palestine in which Christ is present, calling on his persecutors to cease.

Prayer

God of Resurrection

May we experience abundance beyond exploitation and exclusion,
be transformed to live life in abundance

May our eyes be opened to see where the powers of death are manifest

May we be blessed with anger because of exclusion and oppression in our societies,
so that we become agents of justice and transformation,
be blessed with the courage to find new paths, to look into our own hearts and be transformed,

May we be blessed with love so that we become teachers of life

Janneke Stegeman

Dr Janneke Stegeman is a Dutch public theologian and biblical scholar. She is interested in the interaction between religion and conflict and indecent theology. She regularly gives lectures, preaches and writes articles on these topics. With Mariecke van den Berg en Matthea Westerduin, Janneke founded TITS (The Indecent Theology Society)/GeNOT (Genootschap voor Onbetamelijke Theology).

