

Easter Revisited

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Easter is without a doubt the most sacred time of the Christian year. As UUs we have rejected the divine nature of Jesus but there is no reason to reject the divine message of

Jesus shared during his ministry. Recently two widely published religious scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, collaborated on a book about the final week of Jesus' life titled *The Last Week*.

Borg and Crossan's book reminds us there was much more to that final historic week than the less than credible ending claimed by Christianity for almost 2,000 years. For most of Christianity today, it is Jesus' death which has meaning. For us, it is his life which had meaning. His message passed down through the Gospels, his ministry, his very being echoes across the centuries and continues to inspire people all around the world.

That is the story that Borg and Crossan share with us in their book and which I plan to condense and share with you now. You may not believe in the divine nature of Jesus, but I hope you can believe in the divine nature of the universal message of love, hope, and justice shared by Jesus and meant for us all.

There is no way to retell the story of that final week without first setting the stage. Jesus was probably born around the time of Herod the Great's death in 4 BCE.

The original Herod undertook an elaborate and costly building program where both Jerusalem and the Temple became magnificent monuments to his excess and reflected the opulence of Herod's vision. That vision extended well beyond Jerusalem and included an all weather port on the Mediterranean named Caesarea Maritima. He named the city after Caesar and the harbor after Augustus, which demonstrated the loyalty Herod, a Jew, heaped upon the entire Roman Empire. All of these efforts required vast sums of money, all collected from the Jewish population. Consequently,

Herod the Great was not all that popular with the Jewish people and some called him “Herod the Monstrous” due to his excessive spending and brutal oppression.

After Herod’s death, the Jewish homelands remained in a state of turmoil until his kingdom was subdivided into smaller jurisdictions in 6 CE, when governors were sent from Rome to take over and rule.

Jesus grew up right after Herod the Great’s death under the revised system of governance. Much later, Jesus’ ministry and death took place in the early 30s during a time of relative stability.

It was a time, however, of great frustration on the part of the people, along with vocal discontent coming from religious prophets like Jesus and John the Baptist.

After Jesus’ death, the discontent grew for over two decades until outright revolt broke out against both the Jewish collaborators, such as Herod’s Dynasty, and Rome itself. Led by a group known as the Zealots, the great Jewish revolt took place in 66 CE. They took Jerusalem and the Temple under their control. They removed the high priest and installed one of their own from the peasant classes. One of their first acts was to burn the records of debt housed in the Temple.

Let me recap for just a second. Jesus died in the early 30s and almost two decades later, Jerusalem was taken back from the Roman Empire in a bloody coup in 66 CE. It was at this point in history that the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the four Gospels was written.

The Gospel of Mark was in fact a war-time document written both to understand and explain the state of affairs. It was also written to give meaning and purpose to the fight at hand and a hoped for life to come. Mark actually provided the first in-depth narrative of the life and death of Jesus.

Shortly after Mark’s composition, all hell broke loose in 70 CE when the Roman legions shattered the revolt, reconquering Jerusalem and destroying the Temple forever. With

its destruction, Judaism changed forever. Sacrifice ceased to be practiced and the role of the priesthood was replaced with the new institutions of scripture and the synagogue.

The Gospel of Mark was written during this time of tremendous turmoil and emphasized the roles both the Jewish collaborators and the Roman Empire played. Borg and Crossan contend that much of Jesus' social ministry focused on his critique of the domination system enforced by the Roman Empire and supported by the socially prominent Jewish aristocracy epitomized by the Temple hierarchy and its Chief Priest.

The domination system was a social system marked by three main features. First it was marked by political oppression. Here the many were ruled and oppressed by the few, and the few were made up of the Romans, the monarchy, the nobility, the aristocracy and all of their associates.

Ordinary people, the peasants, the class Jesus came from and represented, had no voice whatsoever in shaping their society. In fact it was not their society. It was a society dictated to them by the elite and powerful.

The second feature of the domination system was economic exploitation. Most of society's wealth came from the production of agriculture, produced by the peasant classes. It went into the coffers of the wealthy and powerful. Those same people set up a system of laws, land ownership, and taxation that ensured their income and lifestyles.

The final feature of the domination system related to religious justification which supported the powerful in their social order over the peasant classes.

The Domination System calls attention to its central dynamic: the political and economic domination of the many by a few and the use of religious claims to justify it. The wealth which supported the Domination System came from local taxes known as tithes and represented over 20% of a family's annual agricultural production. But there was also a "temple tax" paid by all Jewish men over a certain age.

And wealth also poured into Jerusalem for all major religious festivals like Passover, where the normal population of 40,000 swelled to around 200,000. It was against this annual influx of pilgrims into the holy city of Jerusalem that Mark records as the last week of Jesus' life which begins with the Palm Sunday procession, where Jesus enters the city to celebrate Passover.

Many of the primary aspects of Jesus' ministry leading up to this climactic final week, and which surfaced again during the final week, focused on his opposition to the domination system. His ministry climaxed with these final confrontations during the last week of his life.

Jesus was not alone in his confrontations. Both Jesus and John the Baptist in their ministries forgave sins. Forgiveness of sins, however, was a function that the Temple priests claimed exclusively for themselves. Jesus' claims placed him squarely in the way of a domination system that depended on the profits generated by the Temple for the forgiveness of sins. Quite simply, Jesus was horning into their territory and threatening their income. Most of Christianity has taken Jesus' actions in this situation as yet another sign that Jesus was divine. Instead he was simply proclaiming there was forgiveness apart from the Temple.

Jesus also constantly preached about the Kingdom of God. In the first century, "kingdom" was a political term, one we don't recognize in quite the same way.

The people back then were used to the kingdom of Herod or the smaller kingdoms of Herod's sons or most significantly, the Roman kingdom.

To refer to the world as God's Kingdom set up a new paradigm for the people and one that posed yet another problem for the ruling elite. If Jesus' preaching went too far, it threatened once again the revenue and tributes paid to the Domination System's earthly kingdoms.

And finally, when Jesus spoke, he typically preached to the people, the peasants, the rural working class that made up 90% of the total population. He was not preaching to

the elite who dominated the peasants and lived primarily in the large cities. In Mark and in the other Gospels, the only populous city Jesus went to was Jerusalem, and then only for special occasions. He spent the majority of his time in rural Israel with the people, speaking in the countryside and in the small towns like Capernaum. His message was for the people and against the domination system that oppressed them.

Upon his arrival in Jerusalem, Jesus continued his familiar themes. Early in the week Jesus entered the Temple and overturned the money changer's tables. Jesus saw the money changers as stealing from the people and he called them a den of robbers. His actions shut down the Temple, thus disrupting one of the most lucrative times of the year. His behavior simply could not be tolerated for long.

Just the next day, in an attempt to trap Jesus, the Pharisees and the followers of Herod, the Herodians, asked Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" They hoped their trap would undermine and make Jesus vulnerable. If Jesus answered no, he could have been charged with advocating denial of Roman authority, in short, charged with sedition. If he answered yes, he could have been seen as supporting Roman taxation which was economically onerous, but it also symbolized the Jewish homeland's lack of sovereignty.

But of course Jesus was masterful in his reply and he played to the crowd setting a counter trap when he asked to see a denarius. His interrogators had one and they quickly gave it to him.

At the moment they produced and gave Jesus the denarius, they were discredited because the Jewish homeland had two types of coins.

The first, the one used by the Jewish people had no graven images on it, either human or animal. The second type of coin included Roman coinage and those coins had graven images on them. Sincerely observant Jews did not use or carry coins with graven images on them.

So Jesus' request exposed the interrogators for the Roman collaborators they were. By the way, Jesus' final reply was, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's."

Later that same day Jesus was asked by a scribe what was the most important commandment for the people. Jesus then quoted Deuteronomy, Chapter 6:5-6, with the classic Jewish affirmation of loyalty to God. He said, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength."

Then Jesus added a verse from Leviticus, Chapter 19:18 saying, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." To quote the authors, this represented radical monotheism, "if God is Lord, then the lords of this world – Caesar and his incarnations throughout history – are not.

And to love one's neighbor as one's self means to refuse to accept the divisions rendered by the normalcy of civilization, those divisions between the respected and the marginalized, righteous and sinners, rich and poor, friends and enemies, Jews and Gentiles."1[1]

From what I have been sharing with you it seems obvious that during Jesus' active ministry, and during the first few days after his arrival in Jerusalem during that final week, Jesus made a tremendous impact on those around him. First he overturned the



money changer's tables in the Temple disrupting the revenues coming in. His actions threatened the status quo.

Shortly after that event, he publically embarrassed and humiliated the Herodians and the Pharisees who tried to trap him with their question regarding taxes. Instead, he showed them as the Roman collaborators they were. His actions threatened the status quo.

And finally Jesus demonstrated his love and knowledge of the scriptures when asked about the Greatest Commandment. His response demonstrated his respect for the Jewish faith, his love of God, and it equalized all relations and set no one above another, but made each responsible for the other.

This combined with his well-known position regarding what he called the Kingdom of God; put him in the direct line of fire with the other earthly kingdoms symbolized by Rome and the Temple hierarchy.

They demanded loyalty and subservience and even more importantly, they demanded financial tributes. Jesus' actions once again threatened the status quo.

In the end, there was no choice. Those in charge had to do something about this troublemaker, this itinerant preacher, this man called Jesus and they crucified him. Crucifixion was the Roman punishment for those who dared to go up against the Roman Empire, the Domination System Jesus constantly challenged. Crucifixion was the punishment for sedition and treason and Jesus threatened the domination system's status quo.

The events after his death are actually the concluding verses in Mark and they represent the first attempt in the Gospels at telling the Easter story. Mark 16:1-8 says,

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying

to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

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."

Because the original ending was deemed unsatisfactory due to its brevity, over a century later Mark was modified with additional lines, verses 9-20. But Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan did not see it as unsatisfactory. They see the original ending as a parable in the style of Jesus' own parables.

Jesus was sealed in a tomb, but the tomb could not hold him or the power of his message.

Jesus is not to be found in the land of the dead. His message is a living message.

Jesus has been raised. Jesus "who was crucified" by the authorities "has been raised" by God. The meaning is that God has said "yes" to Jesus and "no" to the powers that killed him. God has vindicated Jesus.

His followers are promised: "You will see him."

Jesus' message and the power of that message were for a people at war with the Domination System several decades after his actual death. It was meant to give them hope in their trying times.

For us and the rest of humanity, the message recorded in Mark and the power of that message and the spirit of Jesus never died, they live on. Just as other martyrs who have

also physically died for their beliefs when they went up against the status quo, their oppressors, they too live on.

Gandhi may be physically dead but the power of his message and his very spirit lives on among those who remember him and honor his memory.

Oscar Romero may be physically dead but the power of his message and the hope he gave to the oppressed in Latin America lives on.

Martin Luther King, Jr. may be physically dead but the power of his message and his dream lives on and much of his dream is beginning to come true.

Jesus died but he too lives on whenever anyone protects the Kingdom of God, the very world we live in, not some abstract world in the future, but the world we live in and that sustains day to day.

He lives on whenever anyone takes on the money changers of the world who would take advantage of the poor or the middle class who simply want to make an honest living.

He lives on whenever anyone exposes religious authorities who collaborate with the earthly kings against the people they are supposed to serve and protect.

And Jesus lives on when each of us loves our neighbors as we love ourselves, which is possibly the most difficult task of all.

Yes, Jesus died but he still lives and that is the Easter promise we celebrate today.

Happy Easter!
