



Friday's Formation Note

So Many Stories!
The Rev Evelyn Wheeler

As was noted in on Tuesday's Collect for the Day on St John's Facebook page, Easter Week has a full lectionary for each day, Monday through Saturday, and on each day there is a Gospel story about one of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances. What I find interesting is: They're all different!

As Fr. Pace described in his Easter sermon, Mark's Gospel, in its earliest formulation, has the women running from the tomb after their encounter with a mysterious man in a white robe, who told them Jesus had been raised and would meet the disciples in Galilee and telling no one what they had seen because they were afraid.

But in Luke, the women did go and tell the disciples, who didn't believe them, although Peter went and saw the empty tomb and "went home amazed." In Matthew, after the women were told Jesus was risen and they should tell the disciples to go to Galilee, they then met Jesus and he told them to not be afraid and tell his brothers [*sic*] he was going to Galilee.

In all these accounts, the women always included Mary Magdalene, and the others were identified, variously, as "the other Mary," (Matthew), "Mary, the mother of James," (Mark and Luke), "Salome," (Mark), and "Joanna and the other women" (Luke) – not all were present in all the stories.

Finally, in John's account, only Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. There were two men in shining robes, and no Jesus – and she ran back to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple, who hurried to the tomb and found it empty, and then left. Mary had returned with them, and she saw Jesus, at first thinking he was the gardener. Back she went to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord."

Later, in Matthew, Jesus joins the disciples in Galilee, much to their surprise and "they worshiped but some doubted." He told them, "All authority in heaven and

earth is mine, go and make disciples, baptizing in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

In Luke, he shows up with two of the disciples as they made their way home to Emmaus; when they returned to tell the others, they heard that he had appeared to Simon [Peter]; he then directs them to Bethany, blessed them and was carried up into heaven. In the Book of Acts, more is said about the Bethany visitation: they were to become Jesus’ witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth. Some forty days later, at the feast of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended on them and they preached powerfully in many languages.

And in John, after appearing on the first day of the week (the day of resurrection) to most of the disciples in a locked room in Jerusalem, he appeared a week later when Thomas was present (and showed his hands and side). Then he breathed on them, saying “Receive the Holy Spirit.” He spoke blessing on those who have not seen and yet believe.

Mark, Matthew, and John all have additional texts that, as far as scholars can determine, were probably added later (we have earlier texts that do not include these passages); one of these is Jesus’ injunction to Peter to “Feed my sheep,” found in John’s Gospel. Another has him blessing those who believe and condemning those who don’t (Mark’s second supplemental ending).

And of course, we know that the stories of the Incarnation are different in each Gospel. Then there are other differences we don’t pay a lot of attention to, but scholars have teased them out, and concluded that Mark was most likely written first. Luke and Matthew share many of the events described in Mark, and then they share a second set of events, not found in Mark, and in no manuscript yet discovered, called “Q” (from the German word *quelle*, meaning *source*). Yet both Matthew and Luke have other events not shared with each other or any other known texts. Finally, John stands alone – while some events are shared, they take place in different times in the story line, and the gloss placed upon them is unique.

John’s into mystery; Mark is into secrecy, Matthew is into a more gentile framework, and Luke focuses a lot on how Jesus fulfills scriptural promises.

That’s a long introduction to what I wanted to convey: that our human brains want to conflate the stories, and include all the best bits, thus creating a holistic understanding of the events surrounding Jesus. Yet if we do that, we miss the unique points of view each version presents. Each Gospel was written in a different community setting, with aims and ideas particular to each place and time.

It’s kind of like America – every family has a story of how we wound up here; some from Europe, some indigenous, some from Asia, some from Africa – and the way we view our country is filled both with commonalities and with differences. Some would like to have their own story dominate; others insist on being included, too. There is no one unified story, no one unified vision, no one unified point of view. While this makes for interesting – even, at times, hostile – politics, we have choices we make every day, perhaps without much thought or

self-examination, about what we believe, what we think is important, what we want to be true about America.

And that's true about the Gospels, as well.

Scripture is filled with contradictions, with different stories about similar events (there are two stories about the beginning of everything in the Book of Genesis; there are two stories about Noah and the Ark; there are multiple stories about exile and return, not only concerning Egypt but also Babylon).

What does this tell us? It tells us, among other things, that having the conversation – whether written in Scripture, or spoken in our homes or public settings – is just as important as knowing the facts. It tells us that the facts are not necessarily what we think they are. It tells us that human beings are created in marvelous diversity, we see things in different ways based on our unique experiences and natural tendencies, and that this is ALL PART OF GOD'S CREATION AND JOY.

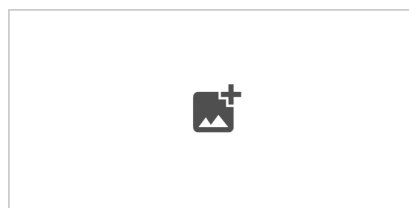
It's frequently legitimate to conflate diverse perspectives; this creates a framework to pin our ideas to. But it's not legitimate to take that conflated perspective and that framework and assume it's the same for everyone and valid for all times and places. The differences offer opportunities to rework the frame, to shore up where it is weak and to replace what is no longer useful or acceptable.

The meta-message of Scripture's variety is: Variety is healthy. Variety is necessary. Variety is the storehouse of possibility. And if someone is telling you they have all the right answers to life's challenges, scriptural or political, they are – almost certainly – mistaken.

God values conversation. God values the questions. God values variety.

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