Class #4: Easter-Pentecost

**Resurrection and the Spirit of the Risen Christ**

Required Readings: Class Notes #4; Buttrick, Ch. 5; Moltmann, Ch. V (pp. 213-273); Hickman, et al., Ch. 6/I-N.

Suggested Readings: Blount.

Introduction to the Season of Easter-Pentecost

The observance of Easter goes back with Pentecost to the 1st century. It constitutes the oldest season of the Christian calendar associated with the Jewish calendar. Before the Council of Nicea (325 A.D.) agreed that Easter should always be observed on Sunday, the date of Easter was varied region to region. It was celebrated during the week of the Jewish Passover either for three days to commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus (from the 14th to the 16th of Nisan) or on the actual *pascha* day (the 14th of Nisan) or on the following Sunday. Later, the early Christians celebrated Easter for fifty days from the Jewish day of Passover to the fiftieth day of the Jewish day of Pentecost as the unbroken period of rejoicing both the resurrection of Christ and the giving of the Holy Spirit to the community as preparing the way for the day of the Lord, the *parousia* (Acts 2:9-11; Joel 2:28-32). As a result, in our Church calendar and lectionary, the celebration of Easter is not merely a one-day festival but continues throughout 50 days, from Easter Day to the Day of Pentecost. That means, the seven Sundays following Easter are called Sundays **of** Easter (First Sunday of Easter, Second Sunday of Easter . . . ) rather than Sundays after Easter.

The Christian faith began with the Easter message. According to Mark, three women who loved Jesus visited his tomb early in the morning, found it empty, saw the risen Christ, and announced to his disciples that Jesus was risen. Their witness to the risen Christ became the foundation of Christianity, and the season of Easter-Pentecost is the core of the Christian year and lectionary. The liturgical color white and gold have been used for the joyous Easter season, and flame red has been used for the day of Pentecost. By deepening our understanding of the faith in the resurrection of Christ Jesus, we can develop a more profound theological perspective for interpreting and understanding other doctrinal and theological themes related to the other seasons of the Christian year. Therefore, other liturgical seasons, such as Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, and Lent, should be reflected on in relation to the Easter message.

When we prepare an Easter sermon every year, we realize that it is not easy to interpret the resurrection narrative to appeal to the contemporary listeners’ modern mindsets. A young Jewish man, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived according to the will of God in Judea in the early 1st century was crucified and killed because of his prophetic ministry against the existent authorities, social, political, and religious. Some of his followers, however, testified that they met him again in three days after his death. According to their witnesses, he was raised from the dead as he had promised before his death. Before ascending into heaven, the risen Christ promised his people that he would continue to be with them in the form of the Holy Spirit until he comes back to judge the world.

Certainly, this resurrection narrative is a mystery which goes beyond our rational understanding. Although Christianity was born from the witness of the risen Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the most difficult parts for us to understand and to preach. What kind of sermons have you heard on Easter Day in your church? How was the mystery of Easter unfolded in the sermons? Have you ever preached an Easter sermon? If yes, what was your theological understanding of the resurrection of Jesus in your sermon?

Discussion on the Faith in the Resurrection

Moltmann summarizes a variety of theological concepts of the resurrection of Jesus into four views—the traditional, the existential, the revelatory, and the eschatological—as follows:

1. **The Traditional View:** In many churches, Easter is celebrated with sharing Easter eggs. This custom started among the early Christians of Mesopotamia, and was spread into Europe and officially adopted by the medieval church. Many preachers often use the symbol of an egg to explain the rebirth of life. In this case, the faith in the resurrection is understood either as the belief in the immortality of the soul (or the life after death) or a born-again faith by believing in the name of Jesus Christ as the savior. This understanding became the traditional view on the Easter message and has prevailed among ordinary Christians as the meaning of the resurrection. In addition, some preachers strive to prove that Jesus’ resurrection was a historical fact that actually happened in the Judaic country two thousand years ago and stresses that the belief in that fact is the core of Christian faith.

Since the Enlightenment, however, the development of historical-critical methods in biblical scholarship has challenged the traditional view on the resurrection and encouraged theologians and preachers to think about the meaning of the resurrection in different ways. According to the modern biblical scholars, such as Julius Wellhausen, Albert Schweitzer, Johannes Weiss, et al., Jewish apocalyptic eschatology, which was the popular worldview of the first-century Jewish culture, dominantly influenced the process of the formation of the Christian gospel. For example, Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God and the judgment of the last day was based on the Jewish apocalyptic eschatology; Apostle Paul’s theology is also based on such apocalyptic ideas as the struggle between the powers of good and evil and the imminent anticipation of the universal reign of the one true God; most of all, for the modern biblical scholars, the descriptions of Jesus’ resurrection in the Gospels were the most vivid examples of the influence of the Jewish apocalyptic worldview.

While the historical criticism helps us understand the historical background of the biblical texts, it raises such serious theological questions in relation to the relevance of the Christian faith based on the resurrection narrative as: If the resurrection narrative is an example of ancient Jewish apocalyptic expressions, does it still have meaning for us, who no longer live in the first-century worldview, or do we need to discard it? If the resurrection narrative is still relevant to contemporary readers, in what sense? How can the faith in the resurrection, which is the essence of the Christian faith, be convincingly maintained by preaching? How can the preacher claim that his or her sermon preached from the lectionary texts of the Easter season is the Word of God to the contemporary listeners?

In relation to these theological and Homiletical questions, three contemporary theologian—Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, and Jürgen Moltmann—propose three different theological perspectives. While they all believe that the Christian gospel is eschatological, their interpretations of eschatology are different. It is worth reviewing their different approaches in order to deepen our understanding of the faith in the resurrection.

1. **Bultmann’s Existential View:** New Testament theologian Rudolf Bultmann regarded Jewish apocalyptic expressions in the Bible as a negative inheritance which Christians took over from the Jews. The only way for him to have meaning from the apocalyptic texts is to “demythologize” them. When the symbolic and mythological language of the apocalyptic expressions are removed, the remainder is a human existential quest. In other words, for Bultmann, the episode of the empty tomb and the promise of Jesus’ Second Coming are apocalyptic expressions which should be disregarded. For him, only Jesus’ first coming has historical meaning, so that Christ’s cross is the climax of God’s redemptive acts as the symbol of the reconciliation of the world. The Easter narrative is not the description of an act of God in the dead Jesus but an existential happening to the disciples from which their faith emerged. The statement that “Jesus was raised from the dead and became Christ” is a confession of personal experience of faith (*kerygma*) of the one who decided “now” to live as a Christian, imitating the life of Jesus.

Therefore, for individual believers, the resurrection has meaning as the specific moment or the “eschatological now” of the personal decision between life and death. As a former student of Martin Heidegger, Bultmann understands the faith in the resurrection as a “present” eschatological call to an existential decision “here and now” with a sense of urgency to live each moment of one’s life decisively as a Christian.

While Bultmann’s existential interpretation seems to appropriately associate the past event of Jesus’ resurrection with our contemporary experience of faith, his view limits the Christian faith to the category of the individual conversion experience, ignoring social and cosmic eschatological dimension of God’s promise for future historical fulfillment.

1. **Barth’s Transcendental View:** Like Bultmann, Barth realizes the significant influence of Jewish apocalyptic views on the Christian gospel. However, he takes the eschatological expressions seriously, rather than discard it completely, in the process of interpreting the resurrection narrative. For him, the apocalyptic concept of eschaton is the transcendental boundary of time and eternity. In other words, the resurrection of Christ Jesus is itself God’s self-revelation to the world as the Lord, transcending the limits of time. By raising Jesus from the dead, according to Barth, God demonstrated the Lordship to the world, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the climax of the revelation of God. It is not a one-time past event but has meaning as the “eternal present” of God.

While Barth’s transcendental interpretation of Jesus’ resurrection as God’s self-revelation emphasizes the sovereignty of God, his view reduces human history to God’s divine history. As a result, the faith in the resurrection means total dependence on the divine power.

1. **Moltmann’s Proleptic Eschatological View:** Moltmann rejects the traditional view on the faith in the resurrection. For him, the resurrection of Jesus is not a historical fact, for it is realistically and historically impossible to prove it. Moreover, the faith in the resurrection does not mean a belief in the “life after death” because such a view of the transmigration of souls drives people to give up all their hopes in this world (fatalism). Moltmann also criticizes both Bultmann’s and Barth’s views. For him, while Bultmann “demythologizes” the resurrection narrative, Barth “dehistoricizes” it.

Like Bultmann and Barth, Moltmann understands the resurrection of Jesus as an apocalyptic event. But, he emphasizes that the meaning of salvation implied in the resurrection of Jesus should be interpreted, neither simply in the present-centered personal existential category as Bultmann interprets, nor in the category of the divine revelation of the eternal presence as Barth understands. For Moltmann, Jesus’ resurrection is a “proleptically eschatological event.” That is, Jesus’ rising from the dead is an act on God’s part, which has future historical meaning. It is the beginning of the new creation of the world, which awaits its consummation in the future (“already/not yet”). In this proleptic sense, the resurrection of Christ is told in the present perfect verb tense, “Jesus **has risen**!” The present perfect tense of the rising of Christ is linked with the present tense of the indwelling of the Spirit, and the present tense of the Spirit is linked with the future tense of the resurrection of the dead (241). Likewise, the resurrection of Christ is the foundation and promise of life in the midst of death and is associated with “an eschatological hope: at the end of time all the dead will be raised together and suddenly ‘in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet (I Cor. 15:52)’” (241).

Moltmann understands that, when the witnesses, including the women at the empty tomb, Jesus’ disciples, and the Apostle Paul, reported that they saw the risen Jesus who had died on the cross, their witnesses to the risen Christ were based on their visionary experiences. What they said was, stresses Moltmann, not that Jesus had returned to this life, but that he was alive in the glory of God and appeared to them in their earthly lives (216). In other words, what they had seen was evidently associated with ecstatic experiences of the Spirit. More precisely, their experience of the risen Christ was the experience of God’s Spirit, the Spirit of the risen Christ. Paul, therefore, called the Holy Spirit the Spirit (or “Power”) of the resurrection, and Luke tells the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost right after the ascension of Christ.

Moltmann explains that the early Christians saw the risen Christ in the Holy Spirit in three dimensions. The first dimension was “prospective.” They saw the crucified Christ in the risen Christ as the living one in the splendor cast ahead by the coming glory of God. In this way, Jesus’ resurrection was the eschatological endorsement of the anticipation of the Kingdom of God. The second dimension was retrospective. They recognized the risen Christ from the marks of the nails and in the breaking of bread. The risen Christ was the one who had a fellowship with them on the earth and was crucified on Golgotha. The last dimension was reflexive. In this dimension, they perceived their own call to follow the footsteps of Jesus Christ. According to Moltmann, Jesus’ rising from the dead as “the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (I Cor. 15:20) opened a new era in human history and continues to invite people to discipleship.

In Moltmann’s proleptic eschatological perspective, “[n]ew creation is beginning in Christ in the very midst of this world of violence and death” (221), and believing in Christ’s resurrection means being possessed by the life-giving Spirit and participating in the powers of the age to come” (219). Therefore, according to Moltmann, the faith in the resurrection is to live “a life of new creation in the midst of the shadows of the transient world” with hope in God’s promise (227).

Even though Moltmann claims that his view dissociates from Bultmann’s and Barth’s views,’ it is noticeable that their views are integrated in Moltmann’s view: “The raising of Christ from the dead is ‘the fact that changes everything’ and is therefore in itself the revelation of God. As the ‘One who changes everything,’ God is the creator of the world that is new [Barth]. . . . The resurrection happens everyday. We experience resurrection by being born again to a living hope through love, in which we already, here and now, wake from death to life [Bultmann] (II Cor. 3:17)” (242). The only, but, the greatest difference between Moltmann and them is that Moltmann’s proleptic eschatological view on the resurrection of Jesus Christ is anchored in the future promise of God, the source of Christian hope.

Homiletical Implications

Moltmann’s proleptic eschatological view convinces us that the joyful message of Easter should itself be “a rising up in the power of life,” personally, socially, and cosmically. This view provides some homiletical insights as follows:

1. Our preaching is to be essentially a hopeful message in the midst of our reality. Our hope comes from the promise of God, the restoration of the Lordship in Christ in the coming future. The resurrection of Christ is the source of our hope and a foretaste of God’s future promise. Therefore, preaching the Easter message begins with the sure faith that God is present in our lives in and through the Spirit and is at work for the fulfillment of the promise of God for the restoration of creation. The movie, “Heaven and Earth,” is one of the illustrations of our hope in the mist of our miserable, hopeless reality.
2. Preaching the resurrection of Jesus is to be visionary. The eschatological hope expressed in the resurrection of Christ encourages us to envision our future in the faith of the resurrection. Our vision should not be a vision of merely private, personal salvation, but should include social, political, and cosmic dimensions. Critical analysis of our present reality helps us discern the will of God for the future of our world.
3. Easter sermons is to be community-centered. The lectionary texts for the Sundays during the Great Fifty days of Easter continue the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the four Gospels and Acts. The reason why the Sundays of Easter have readings from Acts instead of the Old Testament is that the Easter-Pentecost season stresses the character of the community that was formed as a witness to the Kingdom itself. The church described in Acts was the sign of the Kingdom that has dawned and is the model for our church today. Our community of faith should be the center of the most intense struggle for the Kingdom of God.

The real church is characterized as the community in which people experience the movement of the Holy Spirit—inclusive and egalitarian, striving for justice, empowering the powerless, and being filled with love and joy, generosity and sharing. How, then, about our churches? Our experiences with the churches may not be so different from what Martin Luther King Jr.’s more than half a century ago: “11 o’clock Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week,” not only racially, but also socially and economically. In this reality, our church as a post-Pentecost community is called to engage in mission in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit for the creation of the new world.