

EASTER VIGIL/EASTER

When I was a child I was fascinated by Harry Houdini. You may remember he was a magician and had the ability to escape from locked chests and strait jackets with great ease, or so it seemed. Houdini lived at the beginning of the 20th century. He found ways to release locks and use his body to maneuver out of tight places that few others could do. Everyone who saw his act would leave wondering, "How did he do that?"

Magic isn't the impossible. It is using illusion. It is getting the audience to look at something to distract them from seeing the magician doing something else. I suppose what made Houdini so famous is that he was doing something that probably no one had done before. Today there are a lot of magicians and magic shows. We have computer graphics that can fool us and movies and television use all sorts of props to trick our minds. These were not available a hundred years ago. Maybe we can get jaded and think, "I know how that is done. That's not so great."

The reality of our salvation by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ wasn't magic, but it also wasn't something that had been done before. In fact, it wasn't even expected. The people of Israel had come to believe that salvation by God would come in human terms. There would come a Messiah who would rescue the people from oppression by calling together an army and leading a revolution against their overlords. They were imagining that God had done this with David before, wouldn't he do it again?

So, when Jesus came to this earth and began to preach and teach he was thought to be a prophet or a rabbi. When he cured the sick and restored sight to the blind they knew he had been given power by God. When he confronted the Jewish leadership and said that He did this on the authority of God many assumed this was the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus would rescue His people.

Jesus did come to fulfill all that had come before him. He came to show us the sin of Adam and Eve wasn't the last word. They were promised a new beginning and Jesus taught us what true obedience to the Father looks like. He showed us how to recognize the power of God and trust Him even in the midst of temptation.

Jesus did follow in the footsteps of the prophets calling people to repentance from their sins. He reminded them that if they wanted to be holy they should love God first with all their heart, soul, mind and strength, but also to love their neighbor as themselves. He taught them that neighbor might be even someone you least expect like a hated Samaritan, a tax collector or a Roman soldier.

Jesus' healings and miracles were a sign of favor from God. The prophet Isaiah was given a message that when the Messiah comes it will mean the captives will be set free, the blind will see, and the deaf shall hear. Certainly Jesus cured the physical ailments of many people. But he also came to show us that sometimes those who were most captive were the ones stuck in their sinfulness or pride or selfishness. To those who thought they were secure in their riches he challenged them to sell everything, give to the poor, and then follow Jesus.

Yet, in all of this Jesus would be obedient to the Father, even to the point of death. He would not let anything get in the way of the mission, not even the cross. But this is what puzzled the Apostles. How could the Messiah suffer such a terrible death? How could God allow His chosen one to endure such suffering? They didn't understand.

They didn't understand on Easter morning when their master who had died had also risen from the dead. They thought all of their hopes and dreams had been dashed. No, God was doing something new. God raised Jesus and opened the gates of the netherworld. A people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

Jesus' resurrection also pointed to something else quite new. True redemption didn't mean vanquishing the Romans from Jerusalem. No, it was redemption from sin and all its emptiness. It was redemption from a life of slavery to a life of freedom in Christ. It was an invitation to surrender everything to Christ. He nailed to the cross our loneliness, our fears, our emptiness, our pride, and our selfishness. He then released us from the downward spiral of death and led us to the upward spiral of everlasting life.

You and I are here today because we know we cannot find peace on our own. The world's solutions never seem to satisfy. Our quest for peace through power or possession always leaves us empty. We come here to witness anew God's gracious mercy to us. We turn to Him seeking His way of peace. May we be renewed in spirit and experience the peace only He can give.