

Liturgical Readings (Resurrection selections) – Easter Season 2019

Theme: Time to Roll Away the Stone

Let's begin with Masks

*It is no mere accident that the word “persona” . . . has been adopted from the language of the theatre: it is the role of the actor, the mask he wears, the **typical** task he has to fulfill in the purposive action of the plot. (Martin Foss in his study *Symbol and Metaphor*)*

An individual becomes typical – a type - in so far as he or she can be classified, identified, as similar to other people in some abstract way. And so you could say this fellow is a typical Italian guy or Joe is a cowboy right out of central casting or George lives in an ivory tower or Suzy is a dependable housewife or Joan could just as well be a nun or Alice is destined to become another Katherine Hepburn.

Indeed it is in *this* sense that some people are called “personalities” – in so far as we know them through the media by the masks they wear, as stage or platform people about whose actual selves we know little – because in public they remain disguised, even publicized in terms of the “roles” they’re known for on stage and screen. John Wayne is a classic example. John Wayne for many is a classic type of American manliness. That’s the mask he wears. That’s his persona.

One hobby I perform often is to check out the biographies of well known and not-so-well known movie actors on the Internet – to find out who they really were, their childhood, their religion if any, their politics, how they were drawn to a film career, who they married, children, ups and downs – how they died . . . often so much more interesting than their film identities . . . Did you know that the actor George Sanders – so British and phlegmatic in his speech and manner – was born in St. Petersburg, Russia – of German and Estonian ancestry – and prior to becoming an actor managed a tobacco plantation in South America? Who died from an overdose of barbiturates; leaving a farewell note saying: *Dear World, I am leaving because I am bored. I feel I have lived long enough. I am leaving you with your worries in this sweet cesspool. Good luck.*

Are you a type?

What mask or masks do you wear in your daily “performances” after having left the privacy of your residence – where you can let your hair down and be yourself? I have been thinking about this during this season of Christ’s resurrection. We have over the centuries discussed whether Christ really rose from the dead and if so how . . . it being so far fetched, improbable, awkward in modern times as far as convincing even Christians to accept it as fact. But allowing that the closing narratives of the Gospels proclaim the validity of Christ’s resurrection from his tomb, is that all they do? Or are they written in such a way that they validate something about you and me, here and now, millennia later?

What kind of “world” do these narratives open up to us so that it’s not just Jesus who issues from his tomb but each of us as we read them and ponder them – into a “world” more real than the scattershot world we have known from day to day –but now a “world” in which a sunrise makes us pause and when the wind blows it turns the branches of trees into conductors of inaudible music and the earth itself become *noticeable* after so many years of our taking it for granted – as do people, too, in all their worth. And we begin to care in ways we never knew? We begin to become less egotistical.

Scattershot

Focusing on only my years from age five to eleven I can remember fragments of experience – instances, short-term episodes. My family’s move to my paternal grandmother’s house – a house within a block of brick row houses with porches and second story bay windows – in what was even then the inner city of Philadelphia.

In that environment I recall – in isolated ways – experiencing cobblestone streets, no trees, warehouses – breweries empty since prohibition. Horses pulling wagons and my grandmother scooping up horse manure for her backyard garden. Pugnacious kids, street fights, street games, a moody father and absent mother – waitressing at night. A moody grandmother inhaling asthmador powder to allay her asthma attacks. I recall worrisome moments of domestic tension without of course knowing of that wider event the Great Depression that generated the tension. I remember block parties, matinee movies at ten cents per ticket, film heroes, surnames introducing me to ethnic differences, images of soldiers goose-stepping in far away places. Odds and ends of experience.

Catholic school. (I never learned why I was enrolled there, given that my parents were not churchgoers and my grandmother was brooding over a divorce that left her feeling sinful, excommunicated). Nuns, discipline, stained glass that told a colorful story about long ago, full of miracles . . . lunchroom odors . . . wariness over local Protestant churches as places at odds with what were now “my people” – ominous, alien (I might as well have been living in Northern Ireland) . . . wariness also of neighborhood public schools; because if they weren’t Catholic they must have been Protestant. After all they had no statues in the corridors or crucifixes on their walls.

I list these moments or experiences in a random, scattershot way because that’s how I remember them – not as any coherent or integrated or meaningful way but as instances against a background of vacancy, an emptiness. Odds and ends constituting what philosophers call “everydayness” – taken up with “things”; surface impressions of my world.

Coherence?

Sure there were efforts back then of my elders or teachers to add a context to my experiences, pull them together in some meaningful whole – by way of history

lessons or an apostles' creed but such schemata were much too broad and stereotyped, dogmatic, to hold our attention. Somehow at that age I don't think kids are quite ready for a background perspective of that sort. Fairy tales do a better job. It's too early in life to relate this to that, to question the whys and wherefores of our experiences – [although it is said of the boy Jesus at age twelve that he sat in the midst of Temple doctors . . . asking them probing questions - but then again he *was* Jesus and he *was twelve*].

A life of concealment?

I speak of my earliest years but may we not suggest that most people live their whole life that way from day to day – accumulating experiences not so much as they choose but as they occur? So we go to school as a “must” or we do what authorities tell us to do without question. After all you have to graduate but in what direction? Maybe whatever direction comes along? Journalism looks interesting but urgency requires I check the want ads, find out *who* might want me rather than find out what *I* really want to do. Living that way one can lose touch with the possibility of ever knowing what one really wants deep down or *who* one really *is* deep down.

Often it is events within our environment, even beyond our awareness that direct us into a path we could not predict, like the Great Depression that diverted my father into directions he didn't want to go and if I go back far enough did he start out as a roofer by *choice* or because a friend needed an extra hand on a job and my father needed money; was it a matter of expediency instead of personal interest – like: is this what I really want to do or was that question erased from his primer? Or are we complicit, inclined to *conceal* the deeper truth about ourselves; stay shallow by choice. I think of the Jesus narrative in which a man invites another to a banquet and the guest says he has five yoke of oxen and has to check them out. Was that his honest reason for not attending or was he really afraid of what that banquet might entail – like change his life? Are we superficial on purpose?

The randomness of our lives *prolonged*

I just walked you through the randomness of five to six years of my early life – but once into the swim of such existence, I think I can say well into my mature years – even entering a religious order in my teens and submitting to a programmed education and to taking vows that I was in no way mature enough except adolescently to understand . . . priding myself on my obedience (tell me what to do) . . . obedient like a billiard ball . . . I reached thirty to thirty eight years of age before the dogmatic context and everydayness in which I had been raised gave way to a Pentecost – or shall I say a resurrection - that had me rubbing my eyes and gradually from year to year taking in more and more of the depth of this world into which I had been born or thrown – its radical source and meaning – beyond slogans - a home at last and immense in scope and profundity. So that - like at ninety-one years of age - things seem to be just beginning!

Forgetfulness of Who, What, Where and Why we ARE, that we ARE, with all the implications of that discovery - an example: the film *Marty*

For a literary example of the confinement of everydayness, a forgetfulness of Being, our drifting into existence as types instead of human beings deeply grounded in some underlying Source that unites us and the whole of nature into a (notice the small c) "catholic", universal bonding – making us real instead of caricatures --- consider the dialogue and plot of the 1955 film *Marty* whose script was written by Paddy Chayefsky – and received four Academy Awards and the first *Palme D'Or* of the Cannes Film Festival. Chayefsky, by the way, was a Jewish New Yorker of the given name Sidney who when during his military service he asked to be excused from kitchen duty to attend *Mass*: "Sure you do, Paddy," said the officer, and the name stuck.

If you haven't seen it by this date in time, you should. It presents an eloquent display of the everydayness philosophers and theologians talk about. Its script is available on the Internet – and I'm going to summarize it with excerpts to help us retain the power as well as the text of the story.

Marty Piletti is a local butcher in the Bronx played by Ernest Borgnine. He's already in his mid thirties, unmarried, maintaining his old home and his aged mother and making sacrifices to promote the future of his younger brothers and sisters. A customer, Mrs. Fusari, asks him, after mentioning Marty's brother's recent wedding: *When you gonna get married, Marty? You should be ashamed of yourself. All your brothers and sisters . . . they married and they got children . . . I just saw your mother inna fruit shop, and she says to me, 'Hey, you know a nice girl for my boy Marty?'*

Marty has to put up with this frequently – and would like to marry but he's not what you would call Clark Gable – he's heavy set, a face maybe only a mother could love.

Later we have a scene where after work he visits a familiar bar where a bachelor type says, *So Marty, lemme tell you about these nurses . . .* Marty is taken up with a newspaper. They are drinking beer and aimless at the moment, killing time. Marty's friend Angie asks vaguely, *So waddya feel like doing tonight?* Marty returns the question to Angie, *I don't know, Ang' – Wadda you feel like doing?* Ang' says *Well, we oughta do something. It's Saturday night. I don't want to go bowling like last Saturday. How about calling up that big girl we picked up inna movies . . . a month ago . . .* Marty responds, *Which one was that?* Angie then says, *Well, what do you feel like doing tonight?* To which Marty replies, *I don't know. What do you feel like doing?* Angie: *Well, we're back to that, huh?*

Marty then lets it all out. *I'm thirty-four years old. . . Waddya want from me? I'm miserable enough as it is! Leave me alone. I'll go to the Stardust Ballroom! I'll put onna blue suit and I'll go. And you know what I'm gonne get for my trouble? Heartache!*

Later at the Ballroom in his usual role as a wallflower Marty is approached by a fellow who offers Marty money to relieve himself of a date he doesn't find attractive or sexy enough. Marty is shocked that a guy would do that. He looks around and sees the girl in question: Betty Blair (quite plain looking) in the role of Clara, a school teacher, thirtyish or so. She's alone, been jilted and she knows it – happens all the time. Marty watches her as she disappears through an exit ONTO THE FIRE ESCAPE OUTSIDE.

I highlight the fire escape because a world of everydayness, of billiard ball relationships with people and nature, is a combustible place in so many ways – like wars as well as runaway production and consumption. Clara (meaning bright, clear, authentically) in a metaphorical way leads Marty onto a rooftop – fresh air, a step toward resurrection. He comforts her very tentatively.

Clara says, *The last time I was up here, that's where I sat. I sat there for an hour and half without moving a muscle . . . Then I began to cry, and I had to get up and go home.* Marty says, *I cry a lot too. I'm a big crier.* Clara says, *This is something recent with me, this bursting into tears at the least thing.* Marty adds, *Oh, I cry all the time, any little thing. My brothers, my brother-in-laws, they're always telling me what a goodhearted guy I am. Well, you don't get goodhearted by accident. You get kicked around long enough, you get to be a real professor of pain. I know exactly how you feel.* What philosophers call Angst is kicking up, welling up - which is a good thing. Feeling is coming back.

[May not the whole human race – if it weren't so constrained by everydayness, the everydayness of politics, ignorance, unbridled technology, a disintegrated society – make the same declaration: *You get kicked around long enough, you get to be a real professor of pain.* [Only to issue in the blame game called politics? Or else to become numb enough to put up with the news of the day?]

The couple compares phases of their lives. Clara teaches chemistry, lives out by Fordham. Marty served in the army during the war. He gave up a college education to support his brothers. Clara tries to encourage him: *You're an intelligent, sensitive, decent man. I have a feeling about you like sometimes a kid comes in to see me for one reason or another. And some of these kids, Marty, in my classes, they have so much warmth . . . so much capacity. And that's the feeling I get about you . . . I think anything you want to do, you'll do well.* Capacity: we are *made, created* to think deep, see deep, live deep, capacious beyond our expectations and what do we do? We close up.

And then Marty slips in a question: *I'm Catholic. Are you Catholic?* Clara looks down at her hands. She says in a low voice, *Yes, I am.* That's a deeper exchange than perhaps Paddy Chayefsky realizes (although he attended Fordham University). Catholic means Whole – it's hidden in the I AM which Clara speaks; the Whole, the Holy that underlies and caringly propels the whole of creation, every bit of it – the unifying factor – which we have forgotten. These two people are *oriented* by their baptism toward *that* foundation or Source or Ground . . . and their sense of identity

at that level says a lot to *us* – if not to *them* at that moment. What is it Jesus said to the young man in the Gospel: *You are not far from the kingdom of God.*

Marty brings Clara to his nearby home for a short interval, introduces her to his mother. The mother, apprehensive now of a change in her life, reflexively declares she doesn't like Clara: *She's not Italian.* Marty escorts Clara to her more distant residence. He promises to call and then rather than wait for a bus, he is so elated at this whole experience of worth and depth that – in the film – he puts his fist into a metal traffic sign and starts yelling for a taxi. He is alive.

But only to be discouraged when he is – the next night – with his so-called friends. He hesitates to call Clara. Angie says to George: *You don't feel like going downa Seventy-Second Street?* George: *It'll take an hour anna hour back . . . You guys feel like working up a gamea cards?* . . . Marty: *The burlesque! Loew's Paradise! Miserable and lonely! . . . What am I; crazy or something! I got something good here! What am I hanging around with you guys for?* He enters a bar, heads for a phone booth. Angie hurries after him. *Watsa matter with youi?* Marty with one foot in the phone booth turns to Angie: *You don't like her. My mother don't like her. She's a dog, and I'm a fat, ugly little man. All I know is I hadda good time last night. I'm gonna have a good time tonight. If we have enough good times together, I'm gonna go down on my knees and beg that girl to marry me . . . You don't like her, that's too bad.*

Marty is fishing in his address book . . . the look of fury has drained from Marty's face. He glances toward Angie. *When you gonna get married, Angie? . . . You're thirty three years old . . . You oughta be ashamed of yourself.*

Smiling, Marty returns to the phone, and after a fraction of a second he speaks: *Hello . . . Clara? . . .*

Clara meaning clarity, clear, bright like a clear sky at dawn, an image of Being with a capital B. Marty has begun to BE.

Reaction

I read that whole film as a parable about the commencement of an ordinary fellow's resurrection, his awakening from a stressful, inauthentic, let's say, a counterfeit existence to what thinking people see as an authentic, honest, true existence. As one theologian puts it: *Everydayness refers to our usual tendency to conceal things, to regard them superficially, often accepting what 'everyone' (they) says about them . . . in everyday life we have simply forgotten that we are really finite openness, . . . we desperately try to conceal the fact of our openness.* Consequently we flee from whatever revelations, for instance, metaphorical moments, that offer us a way into authentic existence – a way of life and world defined by grace. Marty and Clara were both at points where they wanted to roll away the stone.

So let's turn to this season's episodes of resurrection.

The Resurrection Narratives

The Gospel accounts of the career of Jesus have, like our own lives, an episodic tendency. Things happen, encounters, healings, moments of conflict, frustration, popular acclaim, pressure . . . as he moves from one place to another. He evokes people to transcend the everydayness of their existence in the sense that they live blind, lame, deaf, palsied, paralyzed instead of whole, risen to a more free, creative, honest, caring level of existence. But the 'everyday, inauthentic' habits of society oppose such a disturbance. The Temple, the political leaders, the hierarchical arrangement of life senses its vulnerability, should human beings mature – **Be** - in the *active* (not passive) sense of the word To Be! So he is arrested, his presence and word buried. Until . . . somehow . . . he exits his burial place.

Which exodus signals our own resurrection from all that tried to bury Jesus (and we might add Marty Piletti). What's it like to be a risen human being? Clothe yourself in the texts and find out. For instance, beginning with Matthew's account of Christ's resurrection, let me show the way:

Matthew's account

Things begin to dawn on me. I experience something of an earthquake, a breakthrough – like some heavy stone has been lifted from me, my heart of stone becomes what it should be: warm, rhythmic, soft . . . those who would insure my remaining buried are shaken with fear. A voice says, *Don't be afraid! I know you're seeking Geoff . . . he's not here; he has been raised from his everyday way of being; come and see the place where his disorientations had deposited him. Tell the world about it.*

Then, as shorn as I am of the masks I once wore, revealing my real face – people are both frightened and overjoyed . . . Meanwhile the inauthentic authorities who had me buried make up a story that denies my revival: *Tell people his friends stole him while we were all asleep* – [and sleep we will remain so that this nightmare of his having risen from his tomb will go away.] But this renewed, revived me feels empowered, kin to all people, all nations, all things I once saw as objects, impersonally. I am no longer an isolated ego. *And behold, I, Geoff, am now with you always.*

Or experiment with Luke – applied to anyone called Mary:

Mary experiences daybreak – it's like the first day of her life despite her long earlier burial. The stone (whatever that symbolized) that blocked her exit into a real world, an authentic existence, has been rolled away as if it were a mere pebble. Friends wonder, venture into where she *should* be – since she was supposed to be dead. They are puzzled. What happened to Mary's remains? A voice says, *Why do you seek the living among the dead. Mary is not here; she has been raised. Her remaining in the grip of a scattershot existence was destined to change; it had to change. Time waits for no one.*

And so she appears, walking upon a country road, breathing deep at last, enjoying being alive at last and she meets two of her former friends. *What are you talking (thinking) about?* she asks. They are surprised. They say: *Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know how this Mary was meant to be a poet but the chief priests and rulers, the system that conceals rather than reveals what's really true, erased her as a threat to the status quo of being with a small b? There has been talk that she is alive, that her tomb is empty.*

And so she says, *How foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the poets have always declared – the plot of every great story - that it was somehow necessary for me to be buried, adrift in everydayness, as prelude to really appreciating my escape into daylight.* So these old friends urge Mary to dine with them, during which repast she takes bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to them – and *their* eyes are opened, *their* masks fractured, and they recognize her for who she had at last become – honest, real, fractured and therefore *open beyond all prior enclosure.*

Or experiment with John – applied to anyone called Bill.

Mary of Magdala finds Bill's tomb opened. She tells Peter, *They have taken Bill's body away and I don't know where he is.* Peter and John run to investigate Bill's former abode. He's gone. They don't understand. Mary remains by the tomb weeping – and voices say, *Woman, why are you weeping?* She says, *They have taken Bill away and I don't know where they have put him.* With that she turns around and sees Bill – but does not recognize him. (He is not the person he used to be – he's too alive at last.) Bill asks, *Why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?* She thinks Bill is the cemetery gardener. She is used to seeing only masks, disguises. *If you took Bill away, tell me where you put him . . . where is he?* And Bill says from the depth of all Being: *Mary!* as he had never uttered a personal name so honestly, so caringly before. And she says something in Aramaic – and Bill says, *Don't hold me or drag me back . . . but go tell my friends I shall henceforth reside close to the Source of all Being. No more needs to be said of me except that at long last I AM – in the active, engaging, creative sense of the word – even as Jesus said: Before Abraham came to be, I AM – the basic fact I've overlooked all my previous, scattershot life concealed behind so many "identities". Now at last I can cease to be an ego and begin to BE - akin to All things bright and beautiful / All things great and small.*

Thus these narratives are there not just to be scanned, but to be experienced. Wear them like the magical garment they are, for they anticipate your own resurrection – hereafter and today.

Postscript: A Poem by Juan Ramon Jimenez (1881-1958) translated by Robert Bly

Oceans

I have a feeling that my boat
has struck, down there in the depths,
against a great thing.

And nothing
happens! Nothing . . . Silence . . . Waves . . .

- Nothing happens? Or has everything hap-
pened,
and are we standing now, quietly, in the new life?