

2009 Global Mission Lenten Series

Week Five Reflection

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Take off the grave clothes and let him go!

John 11:38-44

Serving as a missionary in Egypt for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America gives me the opportunity not only to work with colleagues in the Presbyterian Church in their seminary, but also to interact with the Egyptian Orthodox (Coptic) Church and with the predominately Muslim society and with dynamics of encounters between the two world religions of Islam and Christianity. It is estimated that about 10% of the Egyptian population are Christians and the majority of these are members of the Coptic Church.

It has not always been easy for them to live under the rules and the control of Muslims, but since the 19th century more freedom of religious conscience and practice is permitted, though still with some important restrictions on Christians and other non-Muslim religions. Public displays and processions are strictly limited in most places. That is what makes the pictures and the story I am about to present even more interesting to me. The photos here showing Biblical events are carved into a hill side on the outskirts of Cairo, on land given to the Coptic Church by the government many years ago. To reach this site, one drives through a poor village, with the streets lined with large bags of garbage. The sights and smells are unmistakable. (Copts have been workers in rubbish disposal and recycling for centuries.)

However, after passing through the village one reaches a plateau by the hillside, into clear and fresh smelling air. It is here that churches have been carved into the walls and these reliefs boldly proclaim in stone the Christian message. The one which features the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem proclaims the words of Jesus in Luke when he is commanded to silence his disciples, "I tell you," he replied, "if they keep quiet, the stones will cry out." As we focus on the culminating events of Holy Week and Easter, I want to draw our attention to another of the wall reliefs, the one which depicts the raising of Lazarus from the dead. (John 11:38-44). In the story found only in the Gospel of John, we find an expression of faith in an early Christian community when the attention of the disciples is becoming more focused on how to live in this world while still anticipating the second coming in glory of the resurrected and ascended Christ. I believe that this narrative helps us with being part of the expectant people waiting Christ's return, while also celebrating the presence of God's spirit in our lives and world.

We see the persons present at the moment Lazarus has emerged from the tomb after hearing the words of Jesus: "Lazarus, come out!" One disciple is raising his hands sky-ward praising God, the sisters standing near Jesus reach out to welcome their brother back into the world of the living, and a skeptical religious leader appears rather reserved. It is on the next words of Jesus I want us to focus: "Take off the grave clothes and let him go!" (v. 44b). What might these words have to say to us, living so long after the events of that place and time? What inspiration and direction can be receive for our lives?

At St. Andrew's United Church of Christ in Cairo, a non-denominational English-speaking congregation served by an ELCA pastor, Clifford Lewis, we often hear these words of assurance after our confession of sins: "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us; and God raised him up from death *so that we too might walk in newness of life.*" (Italics mine) The command to "Take off the grave clothes" suggests that same theme for us. Get rid of the old, the things that symbolize death and decay in our lives, the garments that bind us to the darkness and despair, and LET GO, LET GOD! through the power of the resurrected Lord. Leave these behind. They are no longer appropriate garments for those who are in Christ.

We know that this is often easier said than done. Yet it may also be that we are at fault for not raising the possibility of new life boldly and bravely enough. Two part of the Christian story here in Egypt can help us to reinforce this theme. The first is the emphasis from early Christian writer like Irenaeus who wrote that "God become human so that humans could become god" (or maybe better expressed god-like). The second is the emphasis of the evangelical Christians who came to Egypt from the United States in the mid-nineteenth century with an excitement borne out of the mission to the America frontier, that we should be born anew (sometimes termed a baptism of the spirit).

There is an interesting tension and blend between these two emphases here in Egypt. To move away from the distractions and things of death in this world was always a part of the Christian response here, most dramatically expressed in the movement to asceticism in the desert and in the monastic movement, which is undergoing a revival at this time in the Coptic Church. Even with the good things that God has provided for us in this world, the determination to leave these behind, so that one might move nearer to God, has been a strong, persistent theme. All this is to be seen within the context of the gift of forgiveness and new life granted through God's grace in baptism.

As happens to all of us when we hear such themes so often, they lose some of their sharpness and vitality, and in a significant way, the coming of *evangelicals* to Egypt all fired up with the spirit both threatened and invigorated the Coptic Church. The *once-born* theology of the Copts, especially expressed in sacrament of Baptism offered to infants, was challenged by the *twice-born* theology, which had developed during the movements called the "Great Awakenings" in the U.S. It has left me wondering just how crafty (maybe devious) God is by bringing these two strains of Christianity together, which evolved in different places and times, yet from the same Gospel message. And it is to remind us that there is a persistent theme of rebirth which needs to be re-introduced (time and again) in our lives.

Living in Egypt for more than a year one comes to experience both the oneness of Egyptian society and the religious dimension of the lives of all of its people, also the divisions and barriers among its peoples. As Christians we now celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, after the tragic reality of his death, two essential parts of our Good News. Yet God works in and through people in many ways and many times. I am only beginning to sense this anew. In a book entitled "The Muslim Jesus", this story is told by Muslims to one another, as one of the tradition by which they honor Jesus.

Jesus was out walking and came upon a group of people worshiping God. They were not very enthusiastic in their worship. He asked them: "Why are you worshiping God?" They replied: "We wish to escape the punishments at the end of the age." Jesus said: "May it be done as you desire." and went on his way. He came to a second group and asked them the same question. (They seemed a bit more joyful in their worship.) They replied: "We want to achieve the blessings of God in the next life." Jesus said: "May it be granted as you desire." and went on his way. He came to a third group who were worshiping with great enthusiasm and with great joy, and asked them the question as well. They answered: "Because we love God!" Jesus stayed and worshiped with them.

May the risen Lord be present in your celebration of this day. (The last photo shows the risen and triumphant Lord who will return in glory.) Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.