



# TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

*on the Branford Green*

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

## From Jesus to Cosmic Christ

By the Rev. Sharon Gracen

July 28, 2013

Professor Marcus Borg, my favorite Jesus scholar, talks about a very necessary distinction that we must make when we read the *New Testament*; that of the Pre-Easter Jesus and Post-Easter Jesus. The Pre-Easter Jesus is the living, breathing, Galilean Jewish peasant, who lived in the 1st century of the common era. He is the historical Jesus; and while there are stories about him doing miraculous deeds, he is a man, a vulnerable human being. He is no longer with us.

The Post-Easter Jesus is the Christ, the resurrected spirit-being who can do things that a human being cannot; walk through walls, be unrecognizable to his own friends, and disappear into thin air, float up to heaven, and be described as we heard today. This Christ is always with us.

Most people who write about the *Letter to the Colossians*, refer to today's reading as an early Christian hymn, a beautiful, poetic description of how people were coming to know this limitless presence, this Christ. We heard it in an academic-sounding version. Now listen to it from *The Message*, a marvelous modern paraphrase translation...

*We look at this Son and see the God who cannot be seen. We look at this Son and see God's original purpose in everything created. For everything, absolutely everything, above and below, visible and invisible, rank after rank after rank of angels—everything got started in him and finds its purpose in him. He was there before any of it came into existence and holds it all together right up to this moment. And when it comes to the church, he organizes and holds it together, like a head does a body.*

*He was supreme in the beginning and—leading the resurrection parade—he is supreme in the end. From beginning to end he's there, towering far above everything, everyone. So spacious is he, so roomy, that everything of God finds its proper place in him without crowding. Not only that, but all the broken and dislocated pieces of the universe—people and things, animals and atoms—get properly fixed and fit together in vibrant harmonies, all because of his death, his blood that poured down from the cross.*

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What I find intriguing is this idea that there exists in creation such a divine organizing principle - this creative, integrative, purposeful, all-encompassing energy, and then that this concept was linked to the experience of the resurrected Jesus, the Risen Christ. Let's think about that for a moment. We can pretty well discern that many of those around Jesus, even for a moment, encountered something unusual. People just knew that they were in the presence of someone with power and unique abilities. He was intriguing in a way that we might call charismatic. There was a magnetism that could encourage people to walk away from their livelihood and family, just to stay in his orbit.

Now this kind of experience was not a positive one for everyone. We know from his story that he was perceived as a threat to some in power in political systems. I believe that it is appropriate to refer to the Jewish Temple system as political. Politics is nothing more than how we organize our common life. The religious authorities who ran the Temple and its treasury were not interested in anything or anyone who might upset the order of things, especially the things that kept them in power. Their power was precarious because of the Roman authorities. Rome came down hard on anyone who disrupted the way they wanted things to be. The High Priest of the Temple and his staff knew full well what would happen to them if Pilate became annoyed of perceived things getting out of control on their watch. So someone making a scene in the Temple during the crowded time of the Passover Festival was destined for trouble. Jesus' preaching and protest were political. He appealed to the masses which were already unhappy with the way things were.

It all would have ended if Jesus had only stayed dead and gone. After all, the greatest power on earth had executed him. Who could stand against that? The fact that people continued to have experiences of Jesus introduced a greater power into the situation. If nothing on earth was more powerful than Rome, then the power that a risen Jesus revealed was beyond this world.

So we have two Jesus; the Pre-Easter man and the Post-Easter cosmic power. We need to understand them both, separately and together and know that the lines between the two often blur. The difficulty comes in realizing that the written material that we have about Jesus, was all written after the experience of the Risen Christ had begun to shape lives and communities. That experience was overlaid onto Jesus the man as the Gospels were written. How could it not have been? Once Jesus became known as a spirit being, people began to look for evidence of that in his earthly life. So Marcus Borg helps us to make the distinction between the stories of Jesus the human being before the Easter experience, and how the Post-Easter experience filtered into the telling of his story.

Back to the *Letter to the Colossians*. This hymn is pure Cosmic Christ. It points to a knowledge of the cosmos that is quite sophisticated. Modern physicists and cosmologists have only recently begun to talk about such a unifying, unified dynamic. However, it is found in many

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ancient spiritual teachings; in Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and strands of mystical Judaism, and Ancient Greek philosophers like Heraclitus, who said, 'All things come out of the One and the One out of all things.' What I find interesting is that people began to apply this concept of cosmic unity to the experience of the Risen Christ. He becomes the one through whom the greatest mystery is made known in a way that humans can understand - the life of a man, and particularly a man who suffered as all humans have suffered.

It is really important that we know how to hold these two different realities in their necessary tension, because if we allow the human Jesus to be overshadowed by the Cosmic Christ, then we lose his humanity, we lose the danger in the courageous way he stood up to authority, and if he is just a god in disguise, then his suffering is not genuine, his message about justice and love does not challenge human error. Without the human, historic Jesus, we lose our connection to the greater story. We need the historic, human Jesus to show us what it looks like when someone lives the larger truth. At the same time, without the Cosmic Christ, human life is devoid of purpose and connection.

For us, actually the important part of this reading from Colossians is what the writer had to say about being a community that follows this spiritual being who had the human experience of Jesus.

Having made this grand statement, the writer of the *Letter to the Colossians*—which, parenthetically, most scholars do not believe was Paul—goes on to say what this cosmic understanding means for the community that is gathered in the name of Christ: "To make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them, God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ."

What this is saying is that the exalted terms used to describe Christ in the opening sentences, can also be used to describe you when you fully give yourself over to the reality of who you are, because Christ has made it known to you. To be "mature in Christ" is to live your human experience fully aware of its spiritual, cosmic nature.

Just imagine where we would be if for the last 2,000 years, Christianity had focused on that rather than arguing about who gets into heaven!

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