

Luke 23:50-24:12 (NRSV)

The Burial of Jesus

(Mt 27.57—61; Mk 15.42—47; Jn 19.38—42)

⁵⁰ Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, ⁵¹ had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. ⁵² This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. ⁵⁴ It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵ The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. ⁵⁶ Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments.

On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

The Resurrection of Jesus

(Mt 28.1—10; Mk 16.1—8; Jn 20.1—10)

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they did not find the body. ⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. ⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” ⁸ Then they remembered his words, ⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

The Da Vinci Code: What Has Dan Brown Unleashed?

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Luke 23:50-24:12*

Standard mystery novels don't sell many copies. Standard mystery writers, if they're lucky and if they write new books often enough, may make a decent living. But then, something happens. A standard mystery writer publishes a book that no one will call great literature, and suddenly it sells over sixty-million copies. It is translated into forty different languages. In addition to popularity, the book creates enormous controversy, especially among conservative Christians. A movie version is released, and the controversy becomes a firestorm. *The Da Vinci Code*. What in the world is going on?

Anyone, a preacher included, who dares to analyze such a phenomenon in under twenty minutes is no doubt biting off more than he or she can chew. On the other hand, no preacher who cares about the church can fail to address a book with a religious theme, a Christian theme, that has captured the imagination of so many in the United States and, indeed, in the world. One has only to look at the most recent elections in this country, or at events all around the globe to know how important religious belief and expression have become both to individuals and societies, even to the world at large.

This morning, I want to address but a corner of the great quilt of topics that *The Da Vinci Code* raises. I want to take a look at what it has captured in the imagination of those who are drawn to it, and conversely, what it has raised for those who fear and condemn it. In one sense, as we shall see, the controversy has roots in the earliest of Christian debates. But in its current version, this is very much a story of the modern era, and especially the history of Biblical scholarship within it.

To cut to the chase and oversimplify as well, in the nineteenth century the critical observations of Biblical scholars that had begun centuries earlier, began to pick up steam. These scholars noted that there were two contradictory creation stories in the beginning of Genesis. Their further investigations led them to realize that there were several different literary styles at work in Genesis, and that it was hardly seamless. They concluded that it was likely to have been a document made by sewing several different documents together. Similarly, New Testament scholars began to note the dramatically different versions of the story that the four Gospels told of Jesus. Not only were there different emphases among the Gospels, but also significant facts were at odds. They didn't agree on geography. They didn't agree on how many years Jesus' ministry lasted. They didn't even come up with same names for the 12 disciples.

These findings were disturbing for almost all Christians, almost all of whom believed that the Bible was fact. Early on a fissure began to open in how people responded to these ideas. There were those, who still exist in very large numbers today, who said that the Bible was factually true. They said that it was the devil at work in those who questioned. They said that the discrepancies could be easily explained, and there continues to grow a huge literature that seeks to account for the literary and historical challenges. The current arguments against

evolution and for creationism are good examples.

In fairness, it should be said that the primary motivation for defending the Bible and the faith against the onslaught of scientific deconstruction was the preservation of a faith by which many people made and make meaning out of life. They had experienced a relationship with God, with the transcendent. Often their lives had been significantly transformed by their experience of the divine. When they said that Jesus had saved their lives, many meant it not only mystically but quite literally. And this scientific deconstruction of the Bible and religion was a real threat. They understood, correctly, that relationship with God, even the idea of God, was at stake. And they resisted that loss as hard as they could. And indeed, their fears have more than a little historical credibility, as we shall see.

Those on the other side of the fissure, those who concluded that creation didn't happen in seven days, but started with the big bang and then took billions of years to get to where we are today, those who were unwilling to believe that Jonah lived in the belly of the fish for three days, those who found it a silly game of mental gymnastics to explain away the obvious contradictions in the Bible began gradually to gain a foothold. This was a slow process, even among what have come to be called liberals, because there remained a desire to leave the sacred untarnished by human scientific investigations.

By the last half of the twentieth century a very interesting development began to take shape. The liberal side of the fissure, while it maintained lip-service to the Bible and traditional Christian doctrines and religion, it also began to ignore them as well. Liberal Protestants became known as the most Biblically illiterate Christians of the modern era. Everyone had a Bible, but few read it. The doctrines – the Trinity, original sin, and the details about the human and divine nature of Jesus – were seldom matters of meaningful import in people's lives or discussions. And an emotional relationship with God or Jesus was dismissed as both immature and self-serving piety. Old-fashioned religious faith became something of an embarrassment.

Energy was poured, instead, into issues of justice and the moral dimensions of Jesus' life. The liberal churches helped lead the way for civil rights and against the war in Viet Nam and nuclear proliferation. Later the liberal churches championed the poor, the discriminated against and the outcasts, from our own cities to South Africa, referring to Jesus' earthly ministry as their model and mandate.

The result of putting its energy into issues of justice on the one hand and of ignoring religion, so to speak, on the other, was a cerebral church with little emotion, except for its anger against society's ills. While the causes it stood for were appealing to many, the trappings of worship and church life began to have less and less attraction. For example, according to the Institute on Religion and Democracy, membership in the United Church of Christ fell from over 2,240,000 in 1960 to less than 1,297,000 in 2003, a decline of 42%. Over that same period, the population in the United States grew by 66%. Let me say that again. Since 1960, our denomination has declined by 42% while the population has grown by 66%. Adjusted for population growth, the UCC has actually declined by a whopping 65% over that 43-year period.

During the last couple of decades there has been a growing group of people who have longed for spiritual connection. This longing has taken many forms, from new-age spiritualities to the practice of other religions, most notably various traditions of Buddhism. What seems to have characterized many of these seekers has been dissatisfaction with both the old belief systems of conservative Christianity and the arid worship and spirituality of mainline

Christianity. The former failed to feed them spiritually and often offended them personally and intellectually. The latter left them feeling as though they were looking at Ezekiel's valley of bones that showed little evidence of revival.

But there was and is something stirring, something afoot. A combination of things have begun to occur. Their individual significance varies from person to person, but together they are becoming a powerful force. First, many people are moving beyond the old debates between science and religion. Especially, they recognize that there are many kinds of truth. Scientific truth is one kind. But metaphorical, truth, is another one. The Bible doesn't have to be literally true to contain truth, nor does it have to have been delivered syllable by syllable from God to be inspired. Second, many are discovering that the institutional forms of many other religions have the similar hierarchical, sexist and theological rigidity issues to those they found in Christianity. Furthermore, some of those who fled to other traditions have become homesick for an acceptable version of their indigenous faith. Third, many have discovered that their longing has included a longing for community, which may have been absent or culturally alien in some of the forms of spirituality they may have pursued.

Over the last couple of decades there has emerged a now lively movement of churches that have been loosely called progressive. According to researchers like Hal Taussig, these churches are the only churches within the old mainline domain that are flourishing. These churches combine a particular and potent set of attributes. They have a spiritual vitality. Their worship is more lively and participatory than standard Protestant worship. That is, it connects with the emotional gladness to be found in connecting with the divine.

At the same time, these Christians embrace the work of Biblical scholarship. Rather than being disturbed by Biblical research or archaeological discoveries of alternate texts, their minds are tantalized by enlarging their relationship with God. They are excited to read Marcus Borg and others like him. For the first time in more than two generations, they actually read the Bible in significant numbers.

These progressive churches and Christians also feel free to embrace their Christianity fully without the need to denigrate other religions. They are quite comfortable singing their truth while allowing that there are other truths of equal value in other religious traditions. Indeed, they often study other faiths with interest rather than with a need to debunk them.

These churches and Christians have strong commitments to social and environmental causes. Their love for God naturally implies a love for the whole of creation. Love of the planet, love of others, irrespective of their race or gender or sexual orientation or station in life are hallmarks of the progressive churches. In short, the progressive churches and Christians are beginning to forcefully and coherently combine a set of intellectual, theological, spiritual, social and religious commitments into a form of Christianity that feeds the soul and opens doors long closed.

It is this foment into which *The Da Vinci Code* landed, and while it isn't a great book, it was received as a breath of fresh air. We've discovered some of the reasons. While its depiction of the church may be overly harsh, the novel takes aim at and cracks open the perceived secret shield and protectiveness of the institution. It seeks to make Jesus, through his relationship with Mary, a more human character, with the tantalizing idea that his bloodline continues in the human race, maybe within some of us. And it seeks to open a place for the feminine divine in a religion that has long been patriarchal and has long downplayed, even obscured, the role of

women within it.

It is to this final point that I want to conclude with a briefest of looks at this morning's scripture. In Luke, at Jesus' death, the disciples have fled. The only ones of his followers who are still there when they bury him are the women. On Easter, it is also the women, Mary Magdalene included, whom come to the tomb, who are told of the resurrection, and who then tell the story to the disciples. And the male disciples' response? They think the women are relating an idle tale to them. Here, in the text, but certainly buried in the tradition, is the story that the women were the first to know and the first to believe. And for there trouble, presumably because they were women, they were disregarded. It cannot have been originally intended but to draw attention to the problematic attitude of the disciples toward the women.

There are many such pieces of evidence preserved in the Bible that suggest an awareness that Jesus or early Christianity intended a much fuller role for women than the church finally accepted. They remain in such texts as ours this morning where they don't seem too noticeable and that have been massaged to fit what Karen King calls the master narrative. But there exist other texts, excluded from the final edition of the Bible, that say it more plainly. In the Gospel of Mary, a Gospel read by Christians until the Canon was fixed in the fourth century, Jesus gives Mary Magdalene special teaching that he gives none of the male disciples. After Jesus' death, Mary tries to teach the disciples this teaching. We pick the text up toward the end:

When Mary had said¹ this, she fell silent, since it was to this point that the Savior¹ had spoken with her.¹⁰ But Andrew answered and said¹ to the brethren, "Say what you (wish to) say¹ about what she has said.¹ I at least do not believe that¹ the Savior said this. For certainly these teachings¹⁵ are strange ideas."¹ Peter answered and spoke concerning¹ these same things. He¹ questioned them about the Savior: "Did he really¹ speak with a woman without our²⁰ knowledge (and) not openly? Are we to¹ turn about and all listen¹ to her? Did he prefer her to us?" Then Mary wept and said to¹ Peter, "My brother Peter, what do you¹ think? Do you think that I¹ thought this up myself in my⁵ heart, or that I am lying about the Savior?"

It has been sixteen centuries since Christians have been able to ask such questions, or to openly embrace such hidden perspectives. Where it will all lead, I do not know, but what Dan Brown has shown us that the desire to consider the questions is full of life. Amen.