

The Day After

There's a folk singer whose work I enjoy, named John Gorka. He wrote a song called I'm From New Jersey. It's pretty funny, I think, portraying New Jerseyans as people with low expectations and therefore the ability to hang in there no matter what happens... There's one stanza in the song that goes like this ...

*I'm from New Jersey;
I don't expect too much.
If the world ended today.
I would adjust. I would adjust.*

In times of stress and crisis, people respond in many different ways. (Even people from NJ!) The human body is an amazing thing, and tends to 'take over' at times – even to the point of shutting down when pain and stress get too great. So we'll see people who are in the midst of a tragedy, kind of walking around, unresponsive... some people will cry and cry, others will find all sorts of things to do – people to call, plans to make, arrange for child care, hospital schedules – whatever is needed to get through. Keep busy.

The first moments, the first few hours of a crisis for some people, as they look back, frequently seem to fade into a series of fuzzy memories. “Did I do that?” “Did I say that?” “Oh, you were here?... thank you. I don't remember.”

We cope. We do what we have to do to get by.

But I know from experience that sometimes the hardest time to deal with is actually 'the day after'. I think there was a made for TV mini-series a number of years ago about people who survived a nuclear holocaust, called “The Day After”. I don't remember anything about it, I don't even remember if I actually watched it (probably not), but the title has stayed with me. It's provocative, I think.

The Day After...doesn't that phrase evoke some sort of image in your mind? For me, the day after is when the shock has passed, when the lists have all been made, when we've gone through some of the 'stages of grief' – particularly the denial stage – and we start to try to put our lives back together based on this new reality that we face.

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The reality of dealing with this disease, or this job loss, or, realizing that this relationship is over, and you'll never understand why. And the most stark and difficult task of all - dealing with the loss of a person that we have loved. The Day After is the day when we walk through the house and see reminders of that person everywhere we look. Every corner, every closet, every piece of paper...

We try to teach our care -givers here how important it is to be with people in times of crisis, but even more so, how is important to be around in the days *following* a tragedy. After the crowds have gone home, and all the things we 'have to do' are done, facing that 'day after' alone is pretty tough. And I deeply appreciate all of you who follow up on those caregiving visits. So important.

For the past few years, we have been calling this service, the night before Easter, an "Easter Vigil". That came about from my understanding of the word 'Vigil'. The word Vigil comes from the Latin *vigilia*, meaning wakefulness. So it is a period of purposeful sleeplessness, an occasion for devotional watching, or an observance.

The way the word is commonly used today is in connection with a funeral – the night before a funeral there is, in some communities, a vigil, or a *wake*. It is a time to remember this person, a time of looking *back*. (We'll come back to that in a minute).

But then I discovered that a vigil can be held on the eve of a religious festival, and is observed by remaining awake – “watchful” – as a devotional exercise or ritual observance. The Italian word *vigilia* has become generalized in this sense and means “*eve*” (as in on the eve of the war, or Christmas Eve). So, I started to realize, that a vigil is not *necessarily* a time of looking back (a time of remembering a past life) but it can also be a time of looking ahead – of anticipating what is to come.

And in fact, the Easter Vigil in the early church was traditionally that very thing! In the Jewish calendar, and also in the early Christian Tradition, a new day began at sundown. so in the Early church, the Easter Vigil was actually the first celebration of Easter!

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It was, for 'high churches' also, the first time that the word "*allelujah*" would be spoken or sung since the beginning of Lent. That is a word associated with Resurrection. The Easter Vigil was historically as well, the service when all the new converts from the previous year would come together to be baptized, and added to the membership of a church.

Now, that's a wonderful tradition. But it's not what we do here! Especially here at the end of Lent 2010, when we're coming to the end of our study, 24 Hours That Changed the World. Because of that, I'm looking at tonight as one more, one last, opportunity to linger at the foot of the Cross, (or tonight, to linger outside the Tomb), and, one more time, to put ourselves into to the picture. To consider what it must have been like to be there. On this night... the day after.

To see the stone that had been rolled over that opening, to remember the crashing thunder of that stone coming to rest... and feeling the emptiness of those first disciples. The Day After.

Now, that imagination for *us* will always be tempered by our knowledge of what is to come. We can't suspend our understanding of Easter; and so – I suppose we should say, *thankfully so* – we will never grasp how hopeless they must have felt. I mean, what more was there for them? This was the Hope of the World; the Way, the Truth and the Life – the long awaited one, the one in whom all the Prophecies came together.

They were so sure...and now, here we are, looking at a great stone covering that Tomb. Where Jesus lays... defeated. Gone.

But, the fact that we can't quite imagine their pain is due to the power of the message of Easter. And so, I think I can understand a little bit, anyway, the early Church's focus of the Saturday night Mass being on the reality that was to be discovered tomorrow morning!

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There have been a few occasions when I've had the privilege of being out in the forest with a view to the east, and waking up very early I could see the hint of dawn in the distance. That very faint line of brightness. Not light, per se, but the promise of light. It's a beautiful sight...

And in a similar way, in the church, we have such a certainty regarding Jesus' Resurrection. As sure as the sunrise, we know that that the hopelessness of that Day After was forever altered.

And because of that, as the Psalmist wrote, (Psalm 112:6 -7)

*Surely the righteous will never be shaken;
they will be remembered forever.
They will have no fear of bad news;
their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD.*

We know, even in our remembering, in our imagining, that the Lord is in control. And so we wait with hope, not just tonight, waiting for Easter, but in life, waiting for the reality to fully take over – because in so many ways this day, this Saturday, is so reminiscent of real life in this world, where we are constantly walking the tightrope between realities.

On one hand, death, pain, and evil... and on the other, hope. Peace. Resurrection. Light of Dawn is just on the horizon. And we will trust in God.