

Last issue, in celebration of Easter, I wrote about my recent return to the church – something I did for mostly practical reasons – and the unexpected spiritual awakening that’s ensued. As I anticipated, I’ve had lots of positive feedback from my church-going readers and virtual silence from everyone else. (Though my husband’s long-time friend out in San Francisco did call to offer Jeff her moral support after reading the column!) I’m touched by the wonderful response I’ve received from so many fellow travelers, and not terribly hurt by the others, who are, after all, just being polite in their silence. It’s not like I expected to inspire a mass conversion among the academics, artists, and assorted secular humanists about town, many of whom I count as my friends. As much as I value them, my growing awareness of God is genuine and profound, with or without their endorsement.



The truth is, religious talk makes non-believers uncomfortable. I know because I recently was one. For plenty of thinking people, belief in something you can’t see – something science can’t prove – just seems ludicrous. And more than a little weird.

I was driving down Carteret Street with my five-year-old the other day, and she noticed that the cross in front of the Methodist Church was draped in purple, just like the one at our Presbyterian church down the road. I told her that purple was the color of Lent, and that on Easter morning, all the crosses in town would be draped in white, to celebrate Christ’s resurrection. This, naturally, led to a discussion of the R word.

“Jesus died on the cross and was buried,” I explained, “But on the third day, when they rolled away the tombstone, he was gone! Jesus had risen from the dead! Isn’t that amazing?”

To which my daughter replied, “Mommy, that would usually be pretty creepy.”

I howled, mainly because of the “usually” part. Diplomatic pre-schoolers crack me up. Let’s face it – on its surface, the Easter story has all the horror and brutality of a “24” episode, complete with a super-hero who “rises from the dead,” zombie-like. “Pretty creepy” is an understatement.

Of course, all our great civilization myths have their creepy aspects. Read any Homer lately? How about Ovid? But I could write about the macabre in mythology ‘til the cows come home without unsettling a single soul. It’s not the creepiness factor that makes people uncomfortable with Christianity. It’s the faith factor – the willingness of Christians to embrace a truth that transcends, and therefore seems to defy, human logic and understanding. That’s the line, right there. Either you can cross it, or you can’t; and those who can’t, frankly, have very little patience with those who can. (I speak from experience!) It’s fine to sport a picture of Venus on your office wall. Or a statue of the Buddha on your desk. Or a pagan fertility goddess on your tee-shirt. But that little silver cross around your neck? You might want to tuck it under your collar. It’s more than just a hip objet d’art, a trendy cultural reference. It implies that you have faith, that you believe in something unseen, that you’re more than just “spiritual” (which is cool); you’re religious (which is not.)

Religion makes plenty of people uncomfortable. And in 21st century America, everyone must be comfortable all the time.

Last fall, the new president of William & Mary, America’s second oldest college and one of its most revered, was so concerned about the comfort level of his student body he ordered that the century-old cross in the college’s historic Wren Chapel be removed from the altar and stored away unless requested for special occasions. Seems he’d received a letter – one letter – from a

non-Christian student who felt the chapel was “unwelcoming” due to the presence of the unobtrusive, two-foot cross. On the basis of that letter – and propelled, no doubt, by the winds of political correctness that continue to buffet our most cherished institutions, eroding our very foundations – President Gene Nichol made the unilateral decision to remove the symbol of William & Mary’s long-standing relationship with the Anglican (and, later, Episcopal) church, which founded the school over 300 years ago as “a perpetual college of divinity, philosophy, languages, and the good arts and sciences.” In one fell swoop, he expunged an integral piece of the college’s distinguished history and stripped what has always been, and still is, a Christian chapel of its primary Christian symbol.

Hey, somebody’s comfort was at stake. Measures had to be taken!

I’m certain President Nichol believed he was doing the right thing. I’m quite certain he believed he’d have lots of support for his decision. After all, William & Mary is one of our nation’s top institutions of higher learning, with an intelligent, sophisticated, and culturally diverse student body. Surely they would get with this program.

But President Nichol, a former lawyer for the ACLU, did not fully understand his students, his alumni, nor the good people of the Commonwealth of Virginia. Apparently, despite the prevailing political winds, they were not prepared to go gentle into that good night of universal comfort.

A “Save the Wren Cross” campaign was immediately mobilized, made up of students, alumni, and other concerned citizens. Angry letters were written, op-ed pieces filled local and campus newspapers, and a petition to restore the cross garnered thousands upon thousands of signatures. Nichol had his supporters, as well – many of them college professors – but they were neither as organized nor as inspired as the Cross-aders. (My label, not theirs.) Eventually, Nichol offered a compromise; he agreed to bring out the cross every Sunday, then store it for the rest of the week. (The school’s prior policy had been that anyone hosting an event in the chapel could request that the cross be removed.) As a bonus, Nichol would post a plaque in the chapel commemorating the school’s historic relationship with the Anglican Church.

This compromise did not go over well with the Cross-aders. Karla Bruno, class of ’81, wrote: *Nichol’s ‘I’ll Give You a Plaque and Sundays’ proposal is unsatisfactory. A plaque that commemorates what ‘was’ does not, by definition, support what ‘is’. The extended hours of display on Sunday is condescending and a continuing slap in the face to the nature of the Chapel itself. It is the Wren Chapel, not the Wren Spare Room. Nichol does not address the idea that the Chapel with the cross on permanent display was indeed welcoming as witnessed by the plethora of non-Christian and secular events that have been held there over the years. No one has been turned away because they were not Christian. If a visitor is insulted by the history and tradition of William & Mary and chooses not to apply to the College for admission, perhaps that is just as well. We should not be remodeling ourselves to suit a particular sort of applicant – the very narrow sort. There is a waiting list already, a huge waiting list. If, in the name of diversity, we must eliminate a cherished core value and tradition, we are not doing anyone a service, least of all the College.*

This sentiment was expressed by a host of alumni and students, and one particularly incensed graduate put her money where her mouth was by withdrawing her promise of a \$12 million donation to the school. Under threat of further turmoil – especially the financial kind – President Nichol offered yet another compromise. A few weeks ago, he announced he would return the Wren Cross to the chapel for permanent display in a prominent place – but this time, it will be in a glass case, along with the aforementioned plaque. The altar will remain open for

religious symbols of any type, according to the service being held at the time.

This latest compromise seems to have satisfied the Cross-aders. They've issued a formal thank you to President Nichol and the Religious Committee. Their website blog is inactive now and the webmaster is no longer answering emails. If it's good enough for them, I guess it's good enough for me.

But I can't help feeling sad and a little unnerved. Yes, the cross is back in the chapel where it belongs. An important chapter in William & Mary's history has been restored. But a cross behind glass? It's a relic. An artifact. Something to be admired and studied, perhaps, but no longer a living symbol of a living God. Granted, it's not likely to make anyone uncomfortable, now, but as someone who's just beginning to explore her faith – someone for whom God has finally become deeply and powerfully real – comfort is only a small part of what I'm looking for when I look to the cross.

In his chilling poem "The Second Coming," William Butler Yeats envisioned what some have interpreted as the end of the Christian era. Though written almost a century ago, the poem's timely undertones are hard to ignore:

☐☐☐ *...The falcon cannot hear the falconer/ Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold/ Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...*

Once we've taken down all our crosses and put them behind glass, once "the falconer" has been well and truly silenced, I just wonder, as Yeats asked so presciently in 1920, "what rough beast, its hour come round at last" will take His place?