

Too Preposterous to Believe

Mark 16:1-12

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It is an absurd suggestion, not to be taken literally; nonetheless, wouldn't it be revealing to set up a polygraph at the Easter worship service, just to get a reading on how many who declare, "I believe...the third day he arose again..., he ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of the Father..."—just to see how many would pass? Truth is, I suspect, there is a doubter in us all, as there is a believer in us all. Who of us cannot identify with that biblical father, frantic with fear, who brought his afflicted child to Jesus for healing, panicked to the point of utter honesty and stammering out the prayer, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief"? So it is, I imagine, in most sanctuaries this Easter morning: people like you and me, who would like more than anything else in the world to be able to recite the creed without question or equivocation, but who in all honesty confess to moments when the whole Easter idea must seem like something too preposterous to believe. And I say that, not to dampen any Easter enthusiasm for the hundred-percenters, or to mount more guilt upon the skeptics; or, for that matter, to add any more discomfort to those who may be here for whatever reason, finding themselves in church today, feeling a bit awkward and out of place, perhaps hypocritical, here celebrating the church's foremost festival of the resurrection.

Rather, the word to each this morning, regardless of where you find yourself along the road of faith, but especially to any who harbor any hint of skepticism, the word today is, "Welcome." You are in good company because most of those there on that first Easter had trouble taking it all in, also. You heard Mark's account, which, incidentally is the purest of all the gospels—it is the earliest, for one thing, but also Mark's style—terse, unembellished, few adjectives, indicative mood, crisp, simple reporting—as Mark tells of Mary Magdalene, together with Mary, the mother of James, and another woman named Salome, who were the first to arrive at the tomb on Easter morning. These people had been there all week. They had traveled all the way from Galilee to be there for the triumphant Palm Sunday parade; only, as we all know now, in retrospect, the week had not turned out as triumphant as they had expected. Still they stayed. They were there when Jesus was betrayed and arrested and ridiculed. They saw with their own eyes the whole horror of the crucifixion. Mark wants to make sure that we understand that they were eyewitnesses to the drama. They witnessed Joseph of Aramathea claiming the body, carrying it to his private garden, reverently placing it in his own tomb. They saw the stone rolled against the opening; they watched as it was sealed shut. They were eyewitnesses to the entire tragic drama, devastated by grief and despair; nevertheless, as soon as they could, following the Sabbath, they returned to the tomb—only to discover that the stone had been rolled away and the body gone. They cannot believe what they see. They assume the body has been stolen—grave robbers, or maybe Pilate's people have taken it for political reasons, but no one is thinking of resurrection. At that moment, any suggestion of resurrection would have been simply too preposterous to believe. Yet they cannot resist.

Cautiously and hesitatingly they move into the open tomb, where they observe a young man dressed in white sitting on the right side. Mark reports, "They are alarmed" (which has to be one of the greatest understatements of all time). Sensing their fear, the stranger says, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, this is the place they laid him. Go and tell the disciples. He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him." Here it is in Mark's version, that the Easter story ends with these three eyewitnesses—afraid, dismayed, and so dumbstruck by what they have seen and heard that they tell no one.

Now, the other, later gospel writers add more detail, and some later renditions of Mark add another twelve verses, but the very earliest record stops at verse eight, leading some biblical scholars to speculate that the lack of detail is intentional—namely, that the oldest text knows that if the focus of the account is only on the forensic details of what happened and how, we may very well miss the point, which is apparently what the young stranger wants to tell us: "He has been raised...he is going into Galilee...there you will see him...just as he told you."

Undoubtedly, the women's questions went unanswered, like our own. Crucial questions: What really went on during those three days? What did happen, and how? What does it all mean for us? Of course, they, like us, were dying to know, and it is not as if smart people, serious-minded people, have not been trying for years to fill in those gaps. Theologians, historians, biologists, and psychologists have been arguing for centuries over those very questions, which all boil down to "Is it true?" Every year or so there comes along some new discovery—a Shroud of Turin, a skeleton in a cave, another ancient scroll—something offering new clues and theories as to what really happened, and yet, the mystery remains. But why should we be surprised? After all, if those who were eyewitnesses found it too preposterous to believe at first swipe, why should it be any less difficult for us? Human tendency over history, I think, has been to romanticize those early disciples. After all, the only images we have of the disciples are those stylized Sunday school pamphlets and haloed figures found in stained-glass windows. All of which has the effect, over time, of elevating the disciples to some level beyond ourselves, somehow awarding them holier and more credible status, imagining that they, closer to the event, must know things that we cannot know. But the sobering truth is that they were no different from us, no smarter or holier. Check the record. Go down the list. Everyone, with the exception of John, Scripture says, "...was slow to believe." Now, I, for one, take comfort in that, as I also take comfort in that honest confession of Reinhold Niebuhr, America's preeminent twentieth-century theologian/preacher, who habitually turned down invitations to preach on Easter, preferring instead, he said, to sit in the pew for Easter worship at one of the more liturgical churches—Episcopal or Roman Catholic, churches with elaborate liturgy and rich music, but no sermon—"in order," he said, "not to be subjected to some preacher making a fool of himself trying to explain the resurrection." All of which reflects the reasoned wisdom of the text: "Do not be alarmed at your disbelief. He is not here. He is going before you into Galilee. There you will see him." So the text tells us "...do not be alarmed." It takes time to believe. It takes time to assimilate experience. As much as we moderns might like to have the whole thing wrapped and resolved once and for all on one single episode of *60 Minutes*, faith cannot be forced or rushed. Moreover, faith is hard work, often frustrating, forever inconclusive and

unfinished—which is why it is called faith, or, as Kierkegaard referred to it, “a leap.” Knowledge can take us only so far, and then what is required is a leap of faith.

“In Galilee, you will see him,” instructs the stranger at the tomb. Only don’t reach for your travel guide, because Galilee is not a place. Galilee is a moment in time. Galilee is metaphor—as old conversations are recalled, images and experience deconstructed and reconsidered, like clues in some cosmic puzzle, until the pieces start to fall into place and a pattern begins to appear, if only partially at first; but in time, one begins to discern a larger theme, and faith starts to take shape.

We celebrate Easter at sunrise, and well we should, but truthfully, belief did not come for the disciples at dawn. It came at dusk—later. Belief came not at the tomb, but at the table and along the road to Emmaus, and only as they returned to Galilee—back into the routines of daily living—and as they reflected on all that had happened and all that they had heard, and as they struggled to factor all of that into their experience, they embraced the claims of faith. Because, you see, Easter is about so much more than the resuscitation of a corpse. Resurrection as a single, isolated doctrine, extracted from the larger context of creation, makes no sense at all. That, you see, is the mistake of those who come to church only on Christmas and Easter, not because God takes roll every Sunday, but because you never hear the whole story that way. It is like coming late to the opera, arriving only in time for the last act. You never get the whole story, and so, of course, it seems absurd.

Listen to the words of Hans Küng, the Catholic theologian: “The resurrection faith...is not however faith in some kind of unverifiable curiosity, which we ought to believe....Nor is the resurrection faith a faith in the risen Christ taken in isolation: it is fundamentally faith in God....” Küng continues:

The resurrection faith is not an appendage to faith in God, but a radicalizing of faith in God. It is a faith in God which does not stop halfway, but follows the road consistently to the end. It is a faith in which man, without strictly rational proof but certainly with completely reasonable trust, relies on the fact that the God of the beginning is also the God of the end.... Resurrection means the real conquest of death by God the Creator to whom the believer entrusts everything, even the ultimate, even the conquest of death.¹

In short, Easter is one chapter—the climactic and crucial chapter, to be sure; nonetheless, Easter is one chapter in God’s cosmic epic of creation. Leading to the question, “If God can create life, is it really too preposterous to believe that God can recreate life?” Or, to put it still another way, Easter addresses the question, “Can God be trusted?”

I still love that old story of the reporter who, interviewing Mrs. Einstein, asked if she understood the theory of relativity, and she said, “Oh, no, but I trust Albert.” Faith is essentially trust, and trust, like love, takes time and work. We talk about building trust, about growing trust. Some say that all little babies are born trusting, and yet, it doesn’t take long in this life to learn caution—don’t take candy from strangers. Count your change. And by all means, don’t believe everything you read or hear. No, trust has to be learned, tested, tried, earned, and experienced over time, like love. Many who have trusted love at first sight have come later to regret their haste, while others, for whom love grew more gradually and cautiously, came in time to experience a level of

loving trust they would never have dreamed possible at the beginning. Which is the way it must have been for those first followers of Jesus, for whom trust came not at Gethsemane, but for whom trust came at Galilee. I suspect it is this way for most of us. Trust comes—if and when trust comes—trust comes from experience through the day-by-day struggles of living.

I remember so very well the incident when Joanna Adams and I were colleagues at Central Presbyterian Church downtown. Her title on our staff was Community Minister, which meant she had staff responsibility for the night shelter. And since it was one of the first and one of the largest shelters for the homeless in the city, the shelter attracted attention from the media; consequently Joanna and Ed Loring (another prominent advocate for the homeless) were invited to be guests on one of the local radio talk shows. Well, you know how that works; the calls came in asking the usual—How many a night? Who staffs it? Who pays for it? Have there been any problems? For the most part, the calls were positive and supportive. Then there came one caller who spoke with a fundamentalist skepticism and an obvious hostility. “Sounds like so much ‘bleeding heart’ social work to me,” said the caller. “What I want to know is, where is Jesus in all this?”

For one brief moment, Ed and Joanna were both speechless—rare for Ed and unprecedented for Joanna—but then she said, “I suppose you will just have to come down to the shelter some night and see for yourself.” “He goes before you into Galilee. There you will see him.” Many a truth has been dismissed prematurely by too hasty a judgment.

Fredrick Buechner, who is about as rational-minded a twenty-first-century preacher as I know—prototype intellectual, Presbyterian, of course—reflected on his own Galilee experience in an article written for the *Christian Century* magazine. It was part of a series in which a number of prominent Christians were asked to write about how their minds had changed over the years—in other words, how they had grown in their belief. Buechner wrote this:

In the past, when my faith was strong, I always trusted God, more or less. I trusted him with my life, which is to say, I trusted him but with the presupposition that...I would always be around to cajole with him, plead with him, and in general to remind him to be the God of mercy and love I always trusted him to be. The change is that now I begin, at least, to trust him with my death. I begin, at least, to see that death is not merely a biological necessity but a necessity too in terms of the mystery of salvation. We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old. This seems to be close to the heart of that mystery.

Then Buechner concludes:

I know no more now than I ever did about the far side of death as the last letting-go of all, but I begin to know that I do not need to know, and that I do not need to be afraid of not knowing. God knows. That is all that matters.²

What more can be said? What more needs to be said? It is all that matters: I trust God, even with my death, I trust God. Hallelujah.

Notes

¹ *On Being a Christian*, trans. Edward Quinn (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976), 360.

² "All's Lost, All's Found" *Christian Century* 97 (12 March 1980): 282-285.