

“Somehow”

Matthew 28:1-10; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26; Colossians 1:15-20

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In the 1960s, a group of archaeologists excavated King Herod’s temple at Masada. They found a pottery jar containing seeds of the Judean date palm, a tree that had been extinct for over eight hundred years. For four decades, those seeds sat in the archaeological collections department of a university, until three of them were planted in Southern Israel in 2005. One seed sprouted. It is the oldest known seed to have germinated and, at that time, was the only living example of the date palm. It grew to ten feet, and they named it Methuselah. Methuselah is still flourishing, and other date palm seeds have been discovered and have sprouted. Scientists hope that they will one day grow a male and female tree, so the species will reproduce for the first time in 800 years. It all began with a few seeds waiting quietly in the dark.¹

Methuselah is a testament to life sprouting against all odds. It amazes me when a tiny basil seed manages to grow into a full plant that gives us pesto all summer. And here is a seed that had been dormant for 800 years sprouting and growing into a mature tree. This is an astonishing story about the persistent, regenerative capacity of the natural world.

But it is not the same as the story of Easter.

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The famous cellist Yo Yo Ma remembers when his father was living in Paris during World War Two. Ma’s father was also an accomplished musician, a violinist. During the war, there was a blackout almost every night. His father said the darkness was terribly frightening and lonely, so he would spend his daylight hours memorizing pieces of music, and then, when the lights went out, he would play from memory to comfort himself and his neighbors. Years later, during pandemic lockdown, his famous son did the very same thing. He gave free online concerts to isolated people across the world. He played with his doors and windows open to the delight of his neighbors, and eventually, he gave an outdoor performance to honor and remember all who died from Covid.²

This story is a testimony to the healing, comforting power of music. It’s a testimony to the gift of beauty, even in the midst of pain and sorrow and to the creative generosity of those who share their gifts. It’s a beautiful story.

But it is not the same as the story of Easter.

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Ten years ago, Richard Joyner, pastor of Conetoe Chapel Missionary Baptist Church, realized he was conducting at least two funerals every month. Often these services were for young people who died because of poor nutrition. His church is situated in a small town in Eastern North Carolina that was officially labeled a food desert, a place where it is difficult to find healthy food. And even when they could find food, many of his church members couldn't afford it. Joyner grew discouraged and angry.

One day, while he was praying, he got the idea to start a farm for the youth who came to camp at his church. That summer they grew greens and sweet potatoes and delivered the produce to members of their community. Initially there was skepticism about the garden: many of his church members had ancestors who had been sharecroppers or slaves on this land, and the idea of farming brought up painful memories. But they persisted and discovered a way to farm that was redemptive and life-giving.

The community had good food, and slowly and steadily, the health of an entire town improved. Joyner said, "The youth enjoy the process [of growing food]. They're playing out there in the fields." Their work is also a lesson in science, mathematics, and the economics of running a business.

The death rate in the town has dropped dramatically. In Reverend Joyner's church alone, people spend four thousand fewer dollars on medicine each quarter than they did just ten years ago. Today, the Conetoe Family Life Center cultivates twenty-one acres of food.³ In the face of sickness and death, Pastor Joyner saw a way forward, and slowly, steadily his church built a ministry that has brought health and hope to his entire community.

This is a story of hope sown from the good work of the church.

But it is not the same as the story of Easter.

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In the weeks leading up to Jesus's death, Jesus's friend Lazarus grew sick and died. Jesus went to Lazarus's tomb, where he saw his friends, Lazarus's sisters Mary and Martha, weeping alongside all who had gathered there. Jesus wept with them. Then he ordered someone to roll the stone away from the grave. Martha protested, "Lord, he's been in there four days. It's going to stink." But Jesus did it anyway, and he called to Lazarus, who walked out still wound up in his shroud. The mourners freed him from his bonds, and Lazarus was restored to life and to his family. This is an amazing story about Jesus's ability to heal, even after death. This story reveals Jesus's authority and his divinity. Soon after restoring his friend to life, Jesus would suffer indignity and humiliation, his body broken and his spirit crushed as he met his own death on the cross.

This moment in Bethany is a window into Jesus's power, a hint that even death may not have the final word. The gospel story makes it clear that we are looking toward Easter when Jesus proclaims, "I am the resurrection and the life."

But even this story is not the same as the story of Easter.

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Easter morning is like no other moment in all of history. We've got nothing to compare it to, no life experience that we can trot out and say, *Oh yes, that reminds me of the time ...*

If Easter is close to anything at all, it's that moment when God spoke into the darkness: Let there be light. Easter is like nothing that's happened on earth since the dawn of time.

Everyone at that empty tomb is shocked into silence. The earth quakes. The angel appears in blinding light. And the guards and the women are struck dumb. As the women leave, they stumble along, at once terrified and overjoyed. And then they run into Jesus who—in what is perhaps the greatest understatement in all of history—just says, “Hello.” Not even Jesus is going to try and explain it. He simply says, “Hello, go tell the others.”

Easter is here. The tomb is empty! The Lord is Risen! And we can't elaborate. We have no language for this, no way to explain it. It is beyond us, bigger than us, bigger than everything. Nevertheless, it is here, right before our very eyes.

We don't witness the actual event of the resurrection, the mysterious power of God that worked in the dark that Easter morning. We see only the empty tomb, and then, the Risen Lord, but they testify to an event like no other. As the meaning of Easter begins to unfold, it's clear that in Jesus's death and resurrection, the world has changed forever, and we, too, will be changed with it.

That empty tomb is like a black hole in the middle of history, slowly pulling all of creation into its center, only for everything to emerge again on the other side—not just washed, not just a little bit nicer, but entirely, beautifully, inexplicably made new. This is the triumph of love that would not win by coercion or military power or the most convincing argument. It is God who won—who conquered sin and death—simply by being what God has always been, the inexhaustible source of creative, self-giving love.

Of course, there are many times—maybe more often than not—when the resurrection life loosed on the world feels hidden. The good news of Easter isn't always laid bare before our eyes. But on this day, we dare to say: Easter is not as hidden as we might think. God is at work in the world. All those stories I told you, they aren't the *same* as Easter—Easter is something decisive God did for the world when God raised Jesus; it's the absolute triumph of good, the vindication of God's righteous son who invites all of us to participate in the new life made possible in him—but all those stories, they are a reflection of Easter. The triumph of Easter making its slow, steady progress in the world. Easter is not as hidden as we might think.

Yes, Easter is about our future—a promise that we, too, will be raised with Jesus, that death will be vanquished and God will make all things new. But that is a future

promise that reaches back into our lives right now. If our future is kept safe in Jesus, and our past is forgiven, our new life—with and in God—begins now, because we have a living hope. Those stories are not the same as Easter, but they give voice to the hope of Easter at work in the world.

In a recent interview, Ukrainian pastor Ivan Rusyn talked about the constant terror and uncertainty of life in his country. But he also said the conflict has helped the church to hammer out its vocation. The church has worked to meet people in their need, providing everything from food and fuel to a space for lament. His people have discovered a generosity and grit that is astounding. In his own life, Rusyn has agonized over prayers unanswered, over his anger at the violence and suffering.

But then he said something surprising, “I will follow even if I don’t understand. Whatever is lost. Will I survive? Will my family survive? I will follow anyway, somehow during this year my relationship with God has become more real.”²⁴

Something has gripped Rusyn and his church. They are being transformed amidst their grief and the very real horror of evil, and they have hope. *Somehow*—he can’t explain it but it’s true. It’s a future hope that is changing their present life.

That’s where Easter meets us. It meets us at the cross and the tomb.

It meets us where evil is real and death threatens at every turn. It meets us where our relationships are most broken and our hearts are most weary. It meets us in our shame and anger and fear. And it dares to say: there is something else. Something that happened 2,000 years ago that cannot be undone. Easter is not as hidden as we might think.

Yes, there is no area of life that is not marked by sin or grief or evil. But there is no piece of that same life that cannot also be made new, even if we cannot always explain how Easter is at work. I love Pastor Rusyn’s word *somehow*. *Somehow*, the mystery of Easter is at work. Sometimes it’s below the surface, sometimes it’s in the long, hard road of forgiveness, or the strange way hope keeps popping up. Sometimes it’s the renewing, reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes, it’s new life that smacks us in the face, unexpected and out of nowhere. Somehow, Easter is not as hidden as we might think.

In Jesus Christ, there is no end that cannot be a beginning. Where we expect a sealed tomb, there is an open door. When we’re convinced it’s all over, the Risen Lord meets us and says, “Hello ... get moving, go on and spread the word, we’re just getting started here.”

That is the joyous, earth-shattering good news of Easter. It’s true this morning for you, for the person next to you, for the person you pray for every day. It’s true for all the world.

Notes

1. Tim Flannery, “The Tree Whisperers,” *The New York Review of Books* (May 24, 2018), <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2018/05/24/tree-whisperers>.

2. Although I have encountered this story in many places, I first heard it in a sermon by Rev. Kristy Farber.

3. Jeff Chu, "How a North Carolina Minister Sowed Seeds of Hope in a Food Desert," *Modern Farmer* (October 19, 2017), <https://modernfarmer.com/2017/10/north-carolina-minister-sowed-seeds-hope-food-desert>.

4. Ivan Rusyn, "War and the Church in Ukraine: Part 2," *Plough Magazine* (March 25, 2023), <https://www.plough.com/en/topics/faith/witness/war-and-the-church-in-ukraine-part-2>.