

# *What If Jesus Meant All This Stuff*

## *Acts 2:1-21*

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On a rocky sea coast where shipwrecks were frequent, there was a ramshackle little lifesaving station. It was just a hut. There was only one boat, but the handful who worked at the station were a devoted lot who kept constant watch. With little regard for their own safety, they regularly went out into a storm if they had any evidence there had been a shipwreck along the coast. Many lives were saved, and soon the station became famous. As the fame of the station grew, so did the desire of others to become associated with its excellent work. They raised money for new boats, more training, more crews. The hut, too, was replaced by a comfortable building, which could adequately handle the needs of those who had been saved from the sea.

And, since shipwrecks don't happen every day, it also became a popular gathering place—a sort of local club. As time passed, the members became so engaged in being together that they had less interest in lifesaving. They did, though, enjoy sporting their lifesaving badges. As a matter of fact, when some people actually were rescued, it was kind of a nuisance because they were dirty and sick and soiled the carpeting and the furniture. Soon, the social activities of the club became so numerous and the lifesaving activities so few that there was a showdown at a club meeting, with some members insisting they return to their original purpose. A vote was taken; those voting for lifesaving were a tiny minority and were invited to leave the club and start another. Which is precisely what they did, a little down the coast. They did so with selflessness and daring in saving lives, and after a while, their heroism made them famous. Their membership was enlarged, their hut reconstructed, and you might guess how it went from there. If you happen to visit that area today, you will find a number of exclusive clubs dotting the shoreline, each of them justifiably proud of its origin and its tradition. Shipwrecks still occur in those parts, but nobody seems to notice much.<sup>1</sup> Were it not for Pentecost, this could have been what happened to the first followers of Jesus Christ. If not for the persistent, expansive wind of the Spirit that invaded the locked rooms of the post-Easter disciples, the church might have become little more than a clubhouse for insiders.

Do you remember where you were or what you were doing the day following Easter? Had anything changed? In the Gospels, even though we have these post-Easter appearances of Jesus, his followers don't really stop long enough to enter a whole new life. A slightly remodeled life, perhaps, but like all of us, it appears they don't like their routine disrupted—even as we seem to feel, without question, that something crucial is missing. Something more is urgently needed.

Living in our world today, what most people are yearning for is not a slightly remodeled version of what we already know. Folks today, in and out of the church, are begging for nothing less than new life. But, there's always a temptation to live much of life on automatic pilot, so there can be an implicit assumption for us who are seeking to follow Jesus that Easter really doesn't change much at all.

The National Transportation Safety Board recently weighed in on actual automatic

pilots—the ones that are on airplanes—by saying that when it comes to “automatic pilot,” “humans are not good monitors of highly automated systems for extended periods of time.” “We want to acknowledge,” one veteran pilot noted, “that you can’t expect someone to be extremely vigilant for seven or five or even three hours. No light comes on to tell you that you’re being complacent.”<sup>2</sup> Pentecost moved Easter out into the world and deep into our lives, where “automatic pilot” is just no way to live.

Easter’s promise and urgency gets co-opted all the time. Jesus gets turned into whatever people seem to need Jesus to be, no matter how far away it is from the life of grace and hope that Jesus lived for and died for. One follower of the Easter Jesus recently put it this way:

The other night I headed downtown for a stroll with some friends from out of town. We walked along the river, where there are street performers, artists, musicians. We passed a great magician who did some pretty sweet tricks like pour change out of his iPhone, and then there was a preacher. He wasn’t quite as captivating as the magician. He stood on a box, yelling into a microphone, and beside him was a coffin with a fake dead body inside. He talked about how we are all going to die and go to hell if we don’t know Jesus. Some folks snickered. Some told him to shut the hell up. A couple of teenagers tried to steal the dead body in the coffin. All I could do was think to myself how I wanted to jump up on a box beside him and yell at the top of my lungs, “God is not a monster.” Maybe next time I will.

Shane Claiborne, the one recounting all this, reflected on the experience: “The more I have read the Bible and studied the life of Jesus, the more I have become convinced that Christianity spreads best not through force but through fascination. But over the past few decades our Christianity, at least here in the United States, has become less and less fascinating.

We have given the atheists less and less to disbelieve. And the sort of Christianity many of us have seen on TV and heard on the radio looks less and less like Jesus.”<sup>3</sup> Pentecost... is the gift of fascination. Renewing, enlivening, delighting. We seem to have lost the power and promise of God’s gifts of wonder and fascination in a world of management and survival, fear and division, coarse public dialogue and dulled expectations of beauty and hope. Pentecost gives the gift of fasciation and stops cold all attempts by those who want to turn God into a monster. Jesus really did mean that the way of love is the way of life. Jesus really did intend for peace to rule and justice to prevail.

The triumph over the cross was a triumph over everything ugly we do to ourselves and to others. It is the final promise that love wins.<sup>4</sup> Pentecost is the promise that the Spirit of the Risen Christ shows up every time Easter is about to be co-opted or manipulated or corrupted. It is the voice of Pentecost that says, “Not that way... *this* way... not for your own aims... but for God’s sake!”

A colleague recently commented,

I saw the expansive Acts 2 reach of God in the great mosaic at the church in Monreale, Sicily—a wonder of the medieval world. There, presiding over

a dazzling array of jewel-like depictions of the story of our salvation is Christ Creator of All. Having seen photographs of that mosaic, I expected to be bedazzled by the Byzantine otherness of Christ, Christ the Judge of Humanity. And yet the Christ I saw was Christ of the wide embrace, hands outstretched, reaching out from his majesty as if to encircle the whole church, the whole creation. All the stories of scripture told with such vitality and wonder in the mosaics of Monreale are vignettes of this grand vision of a God who is stubbornly determined to embrace all of humanity. Leaving the church at Monreale, a street vendor held up a trinket with Christ's picture stamped upon it. "Don't you want to take a little Jesus with you, mister?" he asked. But no, I realized... we don't take Christ with us—Christ always takes us places.<sup>5</sup>

The Spirit of the Risen Christ given to us on Pentecost is the Spirit that reinforces that yes, Jesus really did mean everything he lived for and died for. That Pentecost Spirit also propels us into the world. And this holy Spirit of propulsion may drive you into the streets to set things right; it may cause you to leave the comforts of home for the next challenge, or it may drive you to return to the home where are those who have known you longest and know you best.

You may be propelled to Washington D.C. or to Raleigh or Austin or Atlanta or to city council chambers or neighborhood gatherings. Then again, you may find yourself holding the hand of one at a bedside or folding your hands in prayer or accompanying a friend to an AA meeting. The Spirit of Pentecost can propel you to raise your voice or to learn to listen with a keener ear than you've ever known before. Whatever it is for you, make no mistake, God is speaking, and God is telling us that Jesus really meant all the things he lived for and died for.

In *The Spiritual Life Of Children*, Robert Coles writes about Ginny, a young girl from a poor family who is bright, articulate, imaginative, and has a keenly developed spirituality. Ginny recounts, for example, that her uncle, who was wounded in Vietnam, is still nervous and upset and prone to frequent crying. Ginny wonders how God must have felt during the violence of the war. "If my uncle cries now," she reflects, "God must have cried, too. God must have wept, don't you think?" One day, Ginny was walking home, and along the way, she encountered an elderly woman who seemed lost and confused. Ginny asked the woman if she needed help, and the woman, in relief, responded, "If you could, that would be wonderful." Ginny discovered that the woman had been walking to visit her daughter but had gotten disoriented. Although Ginny was late for her home chores, she sensed that getting this troubled stranger safely to her destination was the chore she most needed to be doing. So she traveled with her, talked gently to her, listened to her as the woman spoke of the pain of her life, and guided her to her daughter's house. When they arrived and Ginny started to leave, the woman grasped her arm and announced that God had sent Ginny to her and that later she would pray a prayer of thanks to God for having Ginny there. On the way home, Ginny wondered what it would be like to be old. She wondered if when she were old and in need, God would send some kid like her to help. "Maybe God puts you here," Ginny thought, "and gives you these hints of what's ahead, and you should pay attention to them, because that's God speaking to you."

Will Willimon has told about his days as a Methodist bishop in Alabama:

One of my churches served breakfast to close to 200 homeless people every morning. I was there awhile back, and on my way in, I noticed a man in the kitchen washing dishes, up to his elbows in dishwater. I recognized the man as a lawyer, a member of the largest, most affluent suburban congregation the city. “I think it’s wonderful you are here, washing dishes for the homeless,” Willimon said to him. “Good for you,” he mumbled, not looking up from his work.

“Have you always enjoyed ministry with the homeless?” Willimon asked. “Who told you I enjoyed working with the homeless?” The lawyer asked. “Have you met any of the homeless out there? Most of them are crazy, or so addicted or messed up that nobody, not even their family, wants them home.” “Well, I, er, I think that makes it all the more remarkable what you are here doing,” Willimon responded. “How did you get here?” The man looked up from the dishwasher and replied: “I’m here because Jesus put me here. How did *you* get here?”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus really did mean all that he lived for and all that he died for. And just to make sure we understand that, at Pentecost we are given the Spirit to propel us into those places we may not go on our own. At Pentecost, we learn that there’s no ignoring Easter power; there’s never the option to simply “add a little Easter” to our lives in the presence of the Spirit of the Risen Christ. We cannot follow Jesus and casually pass by all Pentecost does to sing Easter’s song in all times and in all places.

Two years before Duke Ellington died in 1972, Yale University held a gathering of leading black jazz musicians in order to raise money for a department of African-American music. Aside from Ellington, the musicians who came for three days of concerts, jam sessions, and workshops included Eubie Blake, Noble Sissle, Dizzy Gillespie, Charles Mingus, Max Roach, Mary Lou Williams, and Willie (the Lion) Smith. During a performance by a Gillespie led sextet, someone evidently unhappy with this presence on campus called in a bomb threat.

The police attempted to clear the building, but Charles Mingus refused to leave, urging the officers to get all the others out but adamantly remaining onstage with his bass. “Racism planted that bomb, but racism ain’t strong enough to kill this music,” he was heard telling the police captain. “If I’m going to die, I’m ready. But I’m going out playing ‘Sophisticated Lady.’”

Once outside, Gillespie and his group set up again. But coming from inside was the sound of Mingus intently playing Ellington’s dreamy thirties hit, which that day became a protest song, as the performance just kept going on and on and getting hotter. In the street, Ellington stood in the waiting crowd just beyond the theatre’s open doors smiling—as Mingus filled the space with passion and protest and hope and life.<sup>7</sup>

Pentecost keeps playing the song of Easter, and plays it with such passion, such fascination, such protest, such joy... that it just keeps going on and on, getting hotter and hotter.

It catches us up in its wake and moves us into what Jesus cared about most: a day, a life filled with hope and love, at work bringing peace into the world, engaged in opening up the spigots of justice so it can roar down like an ever-flowing stream. Jesus really did care about all the things he lived for and all the things he died for.

And now, the Spirit of the Risen Christ has shown up and filled us up with new life, the very thing for which the world is desperate. Easter's power just keeps going on and on and on; it's getting hotter and hotter. And you and I have got to get going!

#### Notes

1 I have seen this story in several forms and cited from many sources over the last may years.

2 Christine Negroni, "As Attention Wanders, Rethinking the Autopilot," *The New York Times*, May 18, 2010.

3 <http://www.esquire.com/features/best-and-brightest-2009/shane-claiborne-1209#ixzzOofmZhteS>.

4 Ibid.

5 William Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Logos Productions, May 23, 2010.

6 William Willimon, "Life With Laity," *Journal for Preachers*, Pentecost 2009.

7 Claudia Roth Pierpont, "Black, Brown, and Beige: Duke Ellington's Music and Race in America," *The New Yorker*, May 17, 2010.