

The Failure of Faith and the Triumph of God

Luke 24:1-12

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On the morning of January 30, a little over two months ago, a widow walked to the Island Cemetery to visit the grave of her beloved. She did not go to the cemetery with any great hope. Her intention was simply to remember and honor her husband. But what she found horrified her. The gravestones had been toppled in an inexplicable insult to the dead.

On this morning, on the first day of the week after Passover, a little over two thousand years ago, some women walked to a cemetery outside Jerusalem to visit the tomb of their beloved teacher. They took spices because they had not had time on Friday to properly prepare Jesus' body before the Sabbath began at sundown. After that, such work was against the law. They took spices to the cemetery because they were sure that Jesus' corpse would stink with the smell of decomposition. They went to the cemetery expecting to find only death.

But what they found horrified them. The tomb had been opened by robbers, apparently, and the body had been stolen. Could there be a worse insult to the dead? Yes, they knew their teacher had been controversial. They knew that he had enemies. They knew that many considered him a criminal. But now that they had killed him, couldn't they let him rest in peace?

No one except Jesus rose on Easter morning thinking that Jesus would be alive. Everybody knew that he was dead. He was as dead as anyone in your family who has ever died. The empty tomb didn't make anyone happy. It was an awful sight.

The Easter story is not a story about the victory of faith. It is a story about the failure of faith and the victory of God. When Jesus died, faith died with him. Even when the women, convinced by an angel that Jesus is alive, tell the apostles that Jesus has risen from the dead, they dismiss it as an idle tale. When the risen Jesus walks along side two of his disciples without revealing who he is, they say "We had hoped that he was the one." We had hoped, but we hope no more.

The gospels are unanimous that there was no one who saw the empty tomb and said, "All right! Just what I expected! He's alive!" No, the gospels say that they were perplexed, they were afraid, they were sad. In John's gospel, Mary Magdalene says, "They have taken my master away, and I don't know where they have laid him."

No one had faith, and yet Christ arose. His rising did not depend on anyone believing in him. His resurrection depended on only one thing: the faithfulness of God. That same power that raised Jesus from the dead, the letter to the Ephesians says, has raised us up and seated us with him. In the act of baptism, Paul says, we say to the world that God has raised us up with Jesus. The message of Easter is that the God who raised Jesus can also raise us up if we are one with Jesus, sharing his life.

No one had faith, and yet Christ arose. This is important to remember because it is so common today to hear people talk about Easter as a season of renewal and to hear them talk about the power of faith and hope. Too easily we begin to have faith in faith rather than faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead. Faith in faith is the silly notion in books like *The Secret* that somehow our believing makes things happen. The Easter story ought to remind us that ultimately it is not faith that saves us. It is God. Even when our faith fails us, God can lift us up.

Years ago when I lived in New Jersey it was a big story when Dennis Byrd of the Jets was injured severely in a football game when his neck was snapped. The doctors said at first that he would never walk again. The doctors didn't take into account the God who raised Jesus from the dead. By the time the Super Bowl rolled around Dennis Byrd was on the pregame show giving a testimony about what Jesus Christ had done in his life. His recovery was miraculous, and every chance he got he gave the glory to Jesus Christ. By the time of the Mets opening day in the spring, Dennis Byrd walked onto the field at Shea Stadium with no wheelchair, no walker, no aide, only a jaunty cane and a loving look from his wife to support him. The place erupted in applause.

But then I heard the TV announcer say, "What an example of the power of hope and faith and courage!" That sounded nice until I thought about it. God knows we need more hope and faith and courage, but they are not the power that allowed Dennis Byrd to walk again. What the announcer should have said was: "What an example of the power of God!"

So we dare not make Easter about the power of faith. Rationalist theologians for two hundred years have had doubts about whether Jesus really rose from the dead as a physical, historical event. They prefer to talk about the resurrection as "a faith event." Sure Jesus is still alive, they say, but he is only alive in our life as a community, the way Grandpa still lives in his grandchildren and in our memories of him. If that's all it means, how do you explain the change in the scared disciples who didn't even believe at first? Were they willing to die for a fuzzy feeling when they sang "Kumbaya"? If that's all the resurrection means, we're dead in the water and we ought to go home.

Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches at Duke, that great basketball school, was in a dialogue with Marcus Borg, whom some of you have read as a thought-provoking scholar. Stanley said, "Marcus thinks the disciples had an experience. They said, 'Wasn't it great being with Jesus before they killed him? You remember those great stories he told? The lectures, er, sermons? Just thinking about it makes him seem almost still here....Let's all close our eyes and believe real hard that he's still here. Okay?'"

That's not the way it was. Everyone had given up, gone back to their boats or hidden away from the police. Even when they heard the story they didn't believe it. No one had a faith experience.

No, they went to the cemetery expecting to find a dead person and instead they got the news from God's messengers that Jesus was alive. And then—and this is critical—the living Jesus himself appeared to them—letting them touch him, showing them his wounds, eating with them. He was not a ghost and he was not a feeling. He was the same Jesus who died now raised to life by the God who made the world, the God of Israel, the God who revealed himself most completely in the human life and death of Jesus, the visible image of the invisible God.

It was not the community of believers that produced the idea of resurrection; it was the fact of the resurrection that produced the community of believers. Cambridge scholar C. H. Dodd wrote that the resurrection is "not a belief that grew up within the church; it is the belief around which the church itself grew up, and the 'ground' on which its faith was based."

The resurrection is not a symbol of something else. It is not a symbol of new life or hope or faith. So a preacher on Easter cannot say anything but that Christ is risen. He cannot give a painlessly relevant sermon on how the resurrection of Jesus teaches us never to give up or how good wins out in the end. The resurrection of Jesus does not teach us about anything else. It teaches us that Jesus rose from the dead, which means that he is who he claimed to be, and that death has no power over him. That is the most significant fact in human history. If it true that

God became a human being, if it is true that the God who rules the universe loves us so much that he would die for us, if it is true that God has made a way for us not to die forever but to share eternal life with Jesus, then that changes everything.

Karl Barth, preaching in the 1930's in Nazi Germany against the liberal theology that gave in so readily to the culture, said, "'Resurrection' is the word that, of all the words in the Bible, wants to tell us in the strongest and most unambiguous way: God is not a *thought*, God is not a *word*, God is not a *feeling*. God is *the Great One*, the True One, the Real and Living One, who waits to meet us precisely at that point where *our thoughts* about him end. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead...throws a stumbling block across our path. 'Halt!' it says. 'You are now standing before something you cannot comprehend, because He who comes forth and acts out of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is more than you can think; you stand not only before the origin of your thinking, but before your total life; you stand before God Himself'" ["He Himself," *Come, Holy Spirit*, p. 162, italics his].

More than any other event in history, the resurrection puts us face to face with the power of God over life and death. The awesome truth of Easter is that God won the victory over death without our help. While we humans were struggling to get over our hurt feelings and disappointments over the death of Jesus, God was at work behind the scenes raising Jesus to life and raising him to reign with him over every power in the universe. God did not need our faith to raise Jesus from the dead.

But here is the good news: the God who does not need us actually loves us. His triumph over sin and death in spite of our faithlessness is actually able to bring us to faith. The resurrection tells us that the God we see in Jesus is the real God. It tells us that he is a God who cares about us sinners and was willing to die for us. It tells us that he is a great God and that nothing in the world – not even death – can separate us from his love. It tells us that death is not the end of the story for us – not because we are immortal beings, but because God will raise us from death to eternal life.

That is the message of Easter that I am called to proclaim, and that is the message that you are called to believe. Amen.