

I love Easter stories. I have two. Shortly after the rise of the Bolsheviks, Communist Comrade Lunachatsky is lecturing on “Religion, Opium of the Masses” in Moscow’s largest auditorium. He is an enthusiastic Party apparatchik, eagerly teaching the 7000 assembled listeners how the Christian faith is but one myth after another, and the light of Marxist science was more than enough to replace such superstitions and silliness. He spoke at great length; most pleased with himself when he had concluded he asked if anyone would like to come forward to make comment. A newly-minted young Russian Orthodox priest stepped up. First he apologized to the commissar for his ignorance. “I’ll give you two minutes, not a second more,” snapped the official scornfully. “It won’t take long,” the priest assured him. He rose to the platform, turned to the audience, and proclaimed, “Christ is risen!” With one voice, the vast audience responded, “He is risen indeed!” [from *Mysticism in the East*, Nikolai Arseniew]

This story—a true one, though not factual—reminds us that just as Jesus was raised from the dead, His Church keeps being raised from apparent death. G.K. Chesterton observed there have six times in the history of the Church when it looked like the Church was going to the dogs, and all six time it was the dogs who died. (I’m afraid the biggest challenge of all may be for the Church to withstand the current prosperity and complacency it has helped bring about in the West today.)

(You already know that Easter is the most important celebration on our Christian calendar. (Easter, of course, is very good news for everyone—Christians are simply the ones who have heard and received this cosmic good news, and made it personal. Death has been defeated at the universal level. Christ is the Door; everyone is invited to enter thru Him into eternal life. You heard about the pastor who asked the elderly lady if her husband believed in life after death. “Hah!” she spat out with disgust. “He doesn’t believe in life after supper!”)

Christmas is important—God came down to live among us and save us—but had the Christ not been raised from the dead, how would we know? What good would an Immanuel, a “God with us” be if he were impotent and dead? If God had come down, and then turned out to be a Bully or an Egomaniac like so many of the other gods and goddesses? Pentecost is important—but I’m not sure what to make of a living Spirit as an agent of a dead Son. It couldn’t work the same way.

This day we celebrate God’s vindication, God’s having the last laugh. We’re not there yet; it’s still a broken world—but Jesus having come back from being dead assures us that the future of the world is in the good hands of Almighty God, and His promises are sure. It’s a matter of time. There are still His battles to fight, still His love to shine forth. Darkness and death and evil have many allies in the world. But what He taught, what He preached, the healings He performed—the Way of the Lord will win out over all these ways of the world. The way of forgiveness and mercy over the familiar habits of vengeance and keeping the upper hand. “Might makes right;” earthly schemes of Roman Empire and Thousand Year Reichs and Communist Utopias and our own fatuous Consumerist Paradise are all exposed as what they are: too small, too unimaginative, too limiting, to unrealistic about human nature—and finally consigned to the dustbin of history.

Herod and Pilate and Caesar were all eager to put Jesus to death, to silence His dangerous message of the Kingdom of God now among us, and resurrection and eternal life. They have representatives today eager to silence the good news of His resurrection since its reality questions their false claims to authority in this real world. How many tyrants and demagogues and politicians and pseudo-scientists and pseudo-educators today want to squash any rumors of the Resurrection, which would mean their preferred tools of death and deconstruction are not the last word—that their dominion is limited. [Why are we no longer surprised that just before Easter the latest attempt to destabilize Christ’s Church receives maximum widespread free publicity—it used to be the findings of the Jesus Seminar; this year it’s all about the so-called Gospel of Judah. This document was written centuries after the four authentic gospels—and surprise, surprise—it contains no reference whatsoever, not even doctored, to the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus. The effort to deem the Resurrection of Jesus implausible or impossible or ridiculous continues: according to Paul, the Christian faith rests upon it.] Apart from His being raised, “what everybody knows” would win out: “Life’s a bear, then you die.” What rational basis for hope would there be for any different outlook?

This is all good news about the cosmic triumph of the Way of God over the ways of death and evil and their minions, but even Easter Sunday is no help until we make it personal. (Our believing it does not make it true; Jesus was raised from the dead whether we choose to respond or not.) This is the day for each one of us to sign on again to share in the laughter and the joy of all the angels in heaven and all the saints above and below living in Christ. It won’t help to observe from a distance, to keep our options open. Christ is the Source of our joy; think of Him as a divine jack-in-a-box bursting forth from the tomb—scaring the enemy almost to death. (Luther observed, “God is not a God of sadness, but the devil is. Christ is a God of joy. It is pleasing to the dear God whenever you rejoice or laugh from the bottom of your heart.”) Stay away from Jesus, stay away from the joy of the cosmos!

It was all very personal to the women who trudged out to the tomb that first Easter morning, probably April, 30 A.D. They were heart-broken and hopeless...It was dark when they started out, they had no idea how they would move the stone guarding the tomb (an alternate text of Luke explains it would take 20 men to roll it away.) And the stone was nothing compared to the reality of death blocking the way to the dead Lord whom they loved. All hope was past; this was the third day, as they reckoned time, and by the third day the ancient Jews knew that any wandering spirit could no longer possibly re-animate the corpse. After three days, dead was dead, for sure.

All they could do was to hope to pay their final respects to anoint the dead body of Jesus. This man had loved them, had believed in them, had offered them the forgiving mercy of God which set them on a new course they could never have envisioned or maintained for themselves; Jesus had given them new lives of purpose and hopefulness and joy. So the women were showing their love, their loyalty, their allegiance in the only way left to them.

Who should greet them in the empty tomb but a messenger from God dressed all in white!? He’s sitting at the right side: already in position to teach them, with authority and favor (God’s authority—he’s an angel!) The presence of this angel is of huge significance. Until God is represented in the scene, known to be present in the scene, it

all remains in the realm of the merely human: human hallucination, human myth, human wish-fulfillment, human fairy-tale. Humans can develop some fairly reasonable religions—we just have trouble overcoming death. (There are a lot of other troubles with human-generated religions, but the finality of death is one of the biggest!) The doorway to death can only be opened from God’s side!

The French philosopher Auguste Comte is said to have visited the 19th Century Scottish intellectual and man of letters Thomas Carlyle—himself a sad example of a man who knew about the truths of the Christian faith but could not make it personal—and lived out a sad and disappointing existence. Comte was planning to start a new religion to replace the religion of Christ. He was a child of the Enlightenment; his new religion would satisfy the requirements of science. It would have no mysteries and be as straightforward as the multiplication tables. He would call it “Positivism.” He asked Carlyle for helpful strategy to get things moving along. “Very good, Mr. Comte,” replied Carlyle. All you will need to do will be to speak as no other man ever spoke, live as no other man ever lived, and get yourself crucified, and rise again on the third day—and then get the world to believe you are still alive. Then your religion will have a chance to make some progress.” [indirectly from *World Aflame*, Billy Graham]

What happened at the tomb outside the walls of Jerusalem was not just some women cooking up a new religion. They were simply plodding ahead to do their dismal duty. They were as surprised as you or I would be. The tomb is empty; here comes the culmination of the morning, the scene, the entire gospel of Mark—the culmination of human history thus far. The good news of Easter Sunday:

“Do not be amazed. You are here looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified—He has been raised. But go, tell His disciples—especially Peter—that He is going on ahead of them, again, to Galilee. There you all will see Him, just as He said.”

Of course Mark has the angel speaking to *us*: the women already know why they are there at that tomb broken-hearted in the early morning.

[The angel specifies that this Jesus is the “crucified” One. There is no other. He had died on the cross—the most painful and humiliating means of killing Him and defeating His message that existed. He preached love and got nails and whiplash; He preached dignity and got spit in the face; He preached life and got killed—and as a dangerous political revolutionary or common scum-of-the-earth criminal. Even the Old Testament [Dt 21:23] taught that anyone killed upon the tree is cursed of God. Except for the Christians, the cross was only a disgusting, obscene symbol to the ancients. Citizens would not speak of it. There is no torment which Jesus has not suffered; no evil He has not endured; no place you can go He has not been. He is our Savior—no other.]

The angel also confirms “He has been raised.” Jesus was really dead. God the Father had really intervened into history. His power was unequivocally shown in raising the crucified Jesus into life. (Jesus had resuscitated people who had been dead: Jairus’ daughter, Lazarus, to name two—but they were not “raised” up. They were brought back to human life, “bios,” not life with God, “zoe.” Unlike Jesus, Lazarus died again when his time came. Jesus was raised up into a higher dimension, never to die again. (He’s proved the point—no encore needed or possible!)

“They” had killed him: hatred, fear, “religion,” evil, violence, hypocrisy—all those allies of death. God raised him up, showing Jesus and the women and all of us how His Way of love is more enduring; His will is more powerful than death. Jesus had

gotten crucified because He had obeyed His Father uncompromisingly; the Father raised Him up to “the right hand” (in the worldview of that day) because Jesus had obeyed Him uncompromisingly. Obedience does not lead to a rose garden—but the love and power and immediate presence of God await His obedient servants.

The mission of God kept moving out, keeps moving ahead, even though Jesus had been crucified. Another reason this is such good news. “Jesus has been raised:”—His work, His mission, everything He held dear and gave Himself for is still in play. His traveling roadshow, His divine comedy, will keep playing. First engagement is in Galilee, and He’s looking for players. (And His show’s still running...)

Here the message of the angel gets personal again. “Go and tell Peter and the others that He will be leading them still, beginning in Galilee. Go, and you will see Him.” It’s personal for Peter: Peter is the one who had turned his back on Jesus in His darkest hour: fell asleep in the Garden, denied even knew the man when a very menacing young servant girl confronted him, then totally deserted Jesus at the scourging and at the cross. But the angel calls Peter by name with the good news of divine forgiveness: what Peter had done does not disqualify him. And none of the disciples behaved much better. They all choked under pressure, all deserted their Lord. But the angel’s message is not the condemnation they knew they deserved—“How could Jesus ever use such cowards as these 12—He’s going to start all over with a better cast of characters, and they’ll be discarded to get the punishment they deserve.”

You and I have our stuff, I’m sure. God knows I have mine. But are we worse than Peter? [Do read the Good Friday sermon if you haven’t already.] I betray Jesus every time I think small and take the easier but safer way because I don’t trust His Spirit within me. We betray Him every time we’re too busy to pray with Him; every time our schedules are so full of unnecessary things to that we have too little time for the few things so important to Him. When we buy into those myths of His enemies: “I know better than to offer my life over into His care—I’m too well educated for that;” “I’ve done religion and I won’t get burned again;” “Who am I to make a difference with my life in the grand scheme of things?” I betray Him every time I am too stingy and insecure to be generous, too scared to tell others of His mercy. Every time I decide my depression, my loneliness, my fear, my brokenness, my pain, my insignificance, my sin, my particular way of betraying Him is beyond what Jesus will forgive and redeem. Every time I make decisions and order my life and my time as if it were all mine to order and decide—as if I were God. Oh, we all have our stuff—but I sure wouldn’t have wanted to be in Peter’s shoes! He had some Stuff!

And the unbelievable word of the grace of God keeps coming to us from that angel. Jesus still wants Peter, still wants me, still wants each one of you—whether you think you’re ready to serve such a worthy King yet or not.

Do you ever wonder? At times when you feel far away from God, or as if He’s not really very important, or as if the truth of Easter Sunday, or God’s love in Christ triumphing over every pretender is not personal—are these times caused by anything but plain arrogant stupidity, however camouflaged? Where else are we going to go? Remember when even His twelve apostles, His own first choices, were tempted to turn and leave Jesus behind, when so many of His followers were abandoning Him. He asked them—He asks you and me—“Do you also wish to go away?” Simon Peter answered

Him, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that You are the Holy One of God." [John 6:68-69]

Jesus knows all about our arrogant stupidity; all about our hurt and our fear and our confusion. And still His personal offer keeps extending to you and me. He keeps loving Peter, anyway, and calls to him. He loves the 12, and calls to them. He loves you and me, and keeps calling us back into renewed relationship with Him.

This angel has so much to tell us... The truth of the Resurrection is so large, so all-encompassing, so cosmic—yet so personal. There's still one more wonderful principle, a promise, hidden in these two verses I didn't even notice at first.

Maybe it doesn't apply to you. Maybe you've never felt as if your prayers went unanswered. Maybe you've never felt God was far away, distant from you. Maybe you've never longed to see the face of God in Christ Jesus. Maybe you have never been on your knees, or face down on the carpet, desperate, crying out to Him. (Please never forget, when He feels furthest away from You, what a horrendous price He willingly paid in order to be alive to your cry, in order to hear Your prayer, in order to be near to You and alive to you...)

Maybe what the angel says next does not interest you. He tells the women, "Follow Him to Galilee, and in so doing you will *see* Him." You will see Him! What's that again? What does it mean, go to meet Him in Galilee? It means obey Him! Follow Him! It means move ahead in your life, from this moment forward, trusting Him to be with you and guiding you and deploying you. Galilee is where He had named the twelve; where they had stopped what they were doing to join His traveling Road Show. (Jerusalem's where they had run into a terrible a dead end—as dead as you could get.)

Galilee is where they had been going strong, healing the sick, forgiving the sinners. Galilee's where it all began; where Jesus had announced, "The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand, in Me; repent, and believe in the good news: trust in Me." [Mk 1:15] Where they had been broken to repentance. Where they patiently spent time with Jesus; where they had learned to serve. They had felt His power and His love. They had learned He could be trusted. Not as one starting His own new religion, but as the One sent from the Father. Galilee was the place and the time of their first love, their simple faith, their initial excitement.

In Galilee it's all worth the struggle: to make the grand career move to which the Spirit has been nudging you, which you've been putting off. But also to persevere in your daily patience in raising the children. "In Galilee" you decide to chop away some of the priorities you well know are doing you no good—they are not filling your empty places—in order to make time for God, who will, and His business. "In Galilee" you know that Jesus notices, and cares, that you conduct your business, all your affairs, with integrity. You know it's worth it to face tomorrow with courage even though you're really frightened and no one seems to appreciate your efforts.

The angel is also telling the disciples, "the past is forgiven you." Everyone, from Peter on down, gets a second chance. If you will join the risen Christ in His ongoing mission, His spreading the good news of the Kingdom, you will surely see Him. We sit around playing hide and seek, deciding whether or not we're ready to serve Him, whether we can bear to give up so much to which we cling so tightly—and so little of it worth hanging onto—then we complain we cannot see Him, cannot hear His voice... (Oh, you can't fool me; I know all about this.) Why not do it His way: "Go, and follow Him, and

in your obeying you will see Him. (If you have a better option for seeing Jesus, go for it. If you have a better option for living in laughter and joy, go for it. If you have a better option for the rest of your life, go for it. If you have a better option for the future of the world, go for it. If you have a better option for eternity, go for it.)

Those women got it. They were amazed. Thunderstruck. They ran to tell Peter, to tell the disciples. They didn't stop to chat, didn't stop to analyze it all. But they got the word out, and we have all heard it. The power of the gospel, the reality of the risen Christ still changes lives, still brings life and hope into the darkness of death.

I promised a second Easter story. One very unlikely woman who trusted in the good news of Easter, at great risk, was Viktoria Petrovna. Doesn't ring a bell, I know. But maybe you remember her husband, Leonid Brezhnev. Ruler of the USSR, Head of the Communist Party for 18 years at the height of the Cold War. Long before glasnost, long before Gorbachev. The Russian bear; staunch atheist. She's at his state funeral, in the heart of the Kremlin, November 10, 1982. The somber music has finally played out; she has stood silent and motionless right beside his open casket. And there, before all the Party officials and God and everyone, Viktoria made one last gesture of defiance, of faithfulness, of hope. Just as the two soldiers were closing the lid the last time, she brazenly made the sign of the cross on his chest. She hoped everything he'd devoted his life to had been dead wrong; her action cried out her appeal to Jesus to have mercy on her husband, His most dedicated enemy. She trusted in His power and in His mercy.

Only Jesus the Christ has overcome death. He keeps overturning the nations and Empires, and keeps calling to each of us to come to Him for life.

Hallelujah!

Mark 16: 1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.

But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.