

The Promise and Challenge of Easter

Luke 24: 13-24 2Cor.5:17-19

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¹⁷So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! ¹⁸All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; ¹⁹that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!

I recently re-watched a movie where one of the characters kept saying over and over again, "Everything will be all right in the end, and if it's not all right, that means it is not yet the end." The minute he said that line, my first thought was, "Easter. Easter sermon. That is perfect." That's a pastor's life. Always looking for sermon material.

Yet it's true: that is exactly what Easter is about. "Everything will be all right in the end, and if it is not all right, that means it is not yet the end." Because, not everything is always all right in life, right? Suffering and hardship? Those are real things. It just means those things don't have the last word. And this is where I think Easter is so compelling, even for (or maybe especially) for those of us who have heard this story many times.

Easter brings both a promise, and a challenge. The *promise* of Easter is that we can live in more hope and victory than we sometimes do. Not that we'll always get our way, or that life will be easy. But that even through hard times God will give us hope, and the kind of life, and character out of which comes an indestructible joy that can't be changed by circumstances. And because of that, the *challenge* of Easter is, we are invited to live a larger story than we sometimes do as we follow the risen Christ out into the world. I'll get to that in a couple minutes.

First, the promise. When Jesus walked out of that tomb 2,000 years ago, he ushered in something way more radical than just a religious holiday, or a nice springtime metaphor. He brought a new way of living: where we can live beyond fear, with courage and joy and hope, because we know that God's purposes will prevail in the end. And if they're not prevailing, that just means it is not yet the end. It means that God is still at work.

In fact, Easter means that not even the thing we think of as *THE* end (death) is the end. That's the most obvious meaning of Easter: Jesus conquered death.

Now, I know some may doubt Jesus was actually physically raised from the dead. You are in good company if you doubt that. The disciples doubted it, too,

until they saw proof of it. Sometimes I think we believe, "Oh, you know, back then they were so superstitious, they didn't have science, they weren't as enlightened and all that, so of course they believed Jesus was raised from the dead, and things like that. People believed all kinds of superstitious things back then."

No. As it turns out, people coming back to life was as rare to them, back then, as it is today!

A pastor colleague and I were having a conversation one day, and I told him that I used to ride in the front seat of a hearse with an undertaker from a funeral home, when the graveside service was many miles away—we figured we may as well carpool! When I said that, he then told me a great story: he had a friend who was a pastor in a rural area of the midwest. This pastor would drive with the undertaker from town to town to do funerals, and they rode in the hearse together. Well, after a particularly long day, this pastor was tired, so on the drive home he decided to lay down in the back of the hearse to take a nap. Creepy, but convenient. Just before arriving back in town, the undertaker pulled into a gas station and stopped to fuel up, which woke the pastor up. When he woke up, he sat up, because he thought they had arrived home. So he knocked on the window

to show that he was awake. The problem was, they'd pulled into a full-service gas station. The attendant was there filling the tank. Pastor said he never saw someone run so fast in his life. People coming back to life is not usual. Not then, not now.

The disciples had doubts, perhaps you have doubts, and that isn't a bad thing. Doubt is not the enemy of faith, or its opposite. The opposite of faith, the enemy of faith, is fear—the crippling kind. Which is why Jesus said, “Fear not” more than anything. He didn't say, “Stop doubting” or “Here's theology test to make sure you're 100% right.”

Doubt is normal, and actually can be good. If you doubt Easter and resurrection, you can't have intellectual integrity unless you examine all sides of the evidence. There's solid evidence to show that Jesus was raised from the dead, which is incredibly good news, because death is, well, it's our biggest fear, so I suppose we could say that death *is* our biggest enemy because of the crippling fear it can bring.

Although we certainly try to avoid it, don't we? Especially in our culture.

A few years ago someone came up with an idea for a cemetery on the east side, and they began to advertise what looks like a golf course, but when you

looked at what the advertisement said, it said, "*Some golfers wish they could spend more time on the course. How about an eternity?*" It's a cemetery designed to look like a golf course. The ad continues, "*For the game's most committed fans to be placed in a permanent golf setting.*" Now, to some of you that probably sounds awesome. To others, an eternal golf game sounds more like hell. There are so many ways we try to avoid death, or deny it, but we cannot hide.

Death gets all of us eventually, but Easter tells us we need not fear it.

I heard a recent interview with a woman who is 102. They asked her, "What's the best thing about being 102?" She said, "No peer pressure. I've outlived everybody." And then she said, "I know that death is waiting for me; but I also know that God will lead me from life into Life, and I will be renewed there."

Death gets all of us. But Jesus has conquered it. God, who had the power to create all of this beauty around us surely also has the power to **re**create all of this, and that includes us. That's why the Apostle Paul says, "*Where, oh death, is your victory? Where, oh death, is your sting?*" You know what he's doing there? He's taunting death. This is the theological equivalent of what we used to say on the playground as a kid, "Nanner nanner boo boo, stick your head in doo doo." That's

a loose translation of the Greek... "*Death in vain forbids Him rise. Christ has opened paradise.*" For good reason, we can taunt death.

So, if not even the end (death) is the end, then nothing else can be the end, either. Failure? That doesn't have the last word. Jesus' crucifixion absolutely looked like a failure. He was supposed to be the military messiah that would drive out the Roman army, not be crucified by them. After his death, two of his followers say, "But we had hoped he would be the one to redeem Israel." There's so much pain in that line, "But we had hoped ..." We had hoped to have children, but then the doctor said... We had hoped for all of our dreams, but then I got laid off from my job. I had hoped, but then this addiction got a grip on me.

They had hoped that Jesus would redeem them from suffering. Instead, Jesus redeems us *through* suffering, and shows us that suffering can be redemptive—he makes sense of *our* pain and suffering.

In Jesus, *God* suffers—this is Emmanuel, God with us, suffering with us—but transforms suffering into hope. It's the ultimate martial arts move, where Jesus takes all the suffering and pain that's thrown at him and turns it back against itself, by using the cross to absorb suffering, and transform it, and

conquering death by rising from the grave. With Jesus, suffering is not the end; failure is not the end. Or what *looks like* failure.

There's a story about a young VP at IBM who made some business decisions that ended up losing the company \$10 million. In the grand scheme of a major company, not a huge loss, but a significant one. So he got called into the CEO's office. He knew what that usually meant. So he came in and handed his letter of resignation to the CEO and said, "I'll pack up my office." The CEO said, "Are you kidding? We just invested \$10 million in your education and development. You're not going anywhere; you're on your way to becoming a brilliant leader." It is like that with Jesus. Failure is never the end; we always have a future. Because Jesus turns our suffering into hope, our failures into investments in us and our future.

When the Romans crucified somebody, one of the things they would do is erase that person's name from all public records, as though that person never existed. That's what Jesus has done, not with us as persons but with our mistakes, wrongdoing, our sin, or whatever we want to call it: he erased it as though it's never existed, and gives us the power to live new lives.

In the Bible God says, "I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sins no more." God is not looking at you, thinking, "What a mess." Many of us have heard preachers give us the bad news, saying that we are sinners, or maybe the better news, which is Jesus forgives us. But maybe not the best news, which is: in Jesus, God doesn't look at us as sinners, but as adopted daughters and sons, made in God's image, whom God calls very good.

So, for this and many reasons we can live in more hope and victory than we sometimes do. That is the promise of Easter.

Which brings us to the challenge of Easter. And that is, we are invited to live into a bigger story (Story) than we might believe or imagine, by being part of God's mission to make all things new. Let me just pause on that. This is important. Jesus did not come to start a religion. He came to initiate a movement, and a mission. And the Bible says that God's whole mission is to make all things new. And the resurrection of Jesus is THE magnificent and transformative event that shows that God has initiated the grand process of making all things new. That's why it happens on the first day of the week, which points back to Genesis, where God starts creating on the first day of the week.

On Easter, God starts *re-creating* on this new first day of the week. And how does God plan to make all things new? Several ways, but one of the main ways is... you. Let that sink in. You are God's plan A to make all things new. That's a vision that'll lift your sense of dignity and worth! That's a bigger story. And, it might startle or surprise you. What?!? Me??

This is the challenge of Easter—to believe and live into your part and your purpose in the making-new of all things in God's Kingdom. See, if Jesus' resurrection is just a metaphor, that doesn't challenge anything. We can just have a nice holiday and move on. But if it's real, it's challenging. Because, as C.S. Lewis once said, it means Jesus is on the loose out there! I love Paul's global language in our reading: "In Christ, God is reconciling the world."

And therefore, it means we are asked to respond to Jesus' call to partner with him in making all things new, knowing that in the end God's reconciling and renewing purposes will prevail. Now, that might make our life harder in some ways, but also bigger. Because there is a wideness, a spaciousness in God's mercy in Christ, and in his call to follow and do our part in the renewal of all things.

Resurrection life means freedom, and purpose, even as we follow Jesus into the world to do hard things—*good* hard things.

For example, in our day that means taking seriously the call to racial healing, justice and reconciliation, which starts with deep listening and self-examination (Btw, that's probably the hardest work of personal renewal: examining ourselves so we can *unlearn* our biases and faulty assumptions, so that we might *learn* fresh ways to live in a reconciled Kingdom); it means doing the good work of seeking solidarity with the wounded and the marginalized. It means altering our lifestyle to do our part to keep the earth a hospitable and fruitful place to live *for everyone*, and not just use it as a tool for consumption. In my personal opinion, the making new of all things necessarily *begins* with the renewal of the earth, and creation care.

Easter challenges us to courageously be part of making all things new, knowing that God always gets the last word.

So, what in your life seems to be getting the last word? Is it fear? Is it a feeling of guilt and shame? A strained relationship? Or is it a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day? Or series of days? (that's the title of a children's book by Judith Viorst) Ask the risen Christ to make those things new in your life, and be part of his making new of all things in the world.

In the Bible, a man named Moses leads a group of slaves out of Egypt. They end up trapped at the Red Sea with Pharaoh's army behind them, but Pharaoh did not have the last word. God did, when God divided the sea and they walked through on dry ground. A boy named David is up against a giant named Goliath. Goliath doesn't have the last word, God did, and David slew Goliath with just one stone. Three guys with funny names are thrown into a fiery furnace because they wouldn't worship the king as God, but the king did not have the last word, God did, and they emerged unharmed. A young woman named Esther is asked to bravely enter into a relationship with a foreign king at the risk of her life, in order to protect her people from genocide. But the perpetrators of genocide did not have the last word, God did, and Esther and her people are literally saved.

The doctor gives you a bad diagnosis, the finances look bleak, you're fighting with your spouse, you're lonely: those things are hard, to be sure, but they will not have the last word. I have read the last word of the last sentence of the last book of the Bible and—spoiler alert--Jesus wins!

Jesus is risen! Not as a metaphor or a theological idea. He is risen indeed. He is alpha and omega, beginning and end, and everything in between belongs to

him, and that includes you. It will be all right in the end. And if it is not all right, that just means it's not yet the end.