

Easter Meditation  
John 20:1-31  
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Is it true? A few weeks ago the Discovery Channel aired a scintillating documentary about some ossuaries bearing the names of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Its provocative conclusion is that Jesus died and was buried, and there was no resurrection from the dead. This “discovery” isn’t new; these ossuaries were unearthed in 1980. They’re part of a traveling exhibit called “The Cradle of Civilization” which, among other things, shows how common the names Jesus, Mary and Joseph were at the time of Christ. Nevertheless, it begs the question, and no doubt some of us who come this morning privately wonder. Is the resurrection true?<sup>1</sup>

We’re not the first to wonder, nor will we be the last. Doubt has always greeted the Easter story, from the very beginning, literally, with the first disciples. Of all of Jesus’ followers mentioned in the gospel today, only two of them – Peter and John – are immediately convinced. They run to the empty tomb and have faith ... but they don’t *understand*, the Scripture tells us. Mary isn’t convinced by the empty tomb; she stays in the garden, weeping. The disciples aren’t convinced by Mary’s testimony; they huddle, locked inside a room in fear. Thomas isn’t convinced by the disciples’ story; he openly scoffs in disbelief. The good news that the Lord has been raised has always been questioned. If any of us harbors doubts, we’re in good company.

I’m even going to be so bold as to say that my goal today is not to convince you that the resurrection is factually true. Oh, I believe it is, but it’s faith, not knowledge that the gospel’s after, and that is a colossal difference. I run the risk of boring you to tears on Easter Sunday, but you’re a captive audience, so allow me a little excursus about language. Language matters in the Bible; language especially matters in the gospel of John, who begins with his famous line, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”; this gospel is not going to choose words lightly. Now when John said the disciples “believed,” he could have used the word *nomizein*, that the disciples “knew” that the Lord was raised, but he didn’t. Instead he said they were, in the Greek, *pistos*, “trusting.” And when John said he wrote his gospel so that we would “believe,” he could have said that hoped that we would *nomizein*, “know” the facts of Jesus’ life and teaching. Instead he said, “These words are written so that you may come to *trust* that Jesus is the Messiah, and *trusting*, have life in his name.”<sup>2</sup>

What the gospel is after isn’t about unearthing ossuaries. What the gospel is after is trusting what’s true, True with a capital “T,” life-giving truth, life-changing truth, which frankly all the facts in the world aren’t able to do.

I love the way Annette Simmons says it in a book I recently received from Jeff Anderson, who among other things serves as Associate Dean at the University of Chicago Business School. Simmons says,

“Capital ‘T’ Truths are timeless. ... When a father tells about his little girl who says, ‘Daddy, I wish everyone were as rich as we are,’ from the backseat of their dilapidated Honda Civic, we recognize a Truth no matter what we drive and whether we have children. Truth with a capital ‘T’ is the kind of Truth we recognize and know without empirical evidence. Puppies make us feel good. Love hurts. Resentment keeps the wrong person awake at night. ... When you ... describe one of those capital ‘T’ Truths, it acts like a tuning fork.”<sup>3</sup>

So the question is not, is the Easter story factually, historically accurate in every aspect of its telling. The gospels and St. Paul’s even earlier letters are our best sources, and they all differ in the details. Moreover, no matter how many tombs we unearth in Israel, we will never know with scientific certainty that Jesus was or wasn’t raised. The question is, is it true, with a capital T? Is the Easter story worth *trusting*?

I can’t answer that question for you. No one can. Trust is something you have to experience for yourself. But oddly, the gospels tell us to look for this experience in the places we would least expect it ... in the places we would least imagine trust to live.

First, the gospel tells us, try trusting in the Easter story in our places of grief. That’s where Mary met the risen Lord – not when she was filled with confidence and joy, but when tears were streaming down her face, when she was so distraught that she couldn’t recognize Jesus standing right in front of her.

Unless we are too young or too callow, has any among us not felt that kind of grief, the heartbreak of losing someone you dearly love -- the husband whose head lay on the pillow next to you, the mother who once held you tight in her arms, the friend who forgave your stupid and thoughtless errors. We all have felt that kind of grief, the kind that Mary felt that morning in the garden when her world had fallen apart, and all her hope had died. But Mary leaves that place a different person than when she came, after she hears the Lord call her by name. She runs and testifies to the Truth that she has seen and heard, that death was not the last word.

Stacy’s parents came to trust the resurrection truth this way. My colleague and friend Tom Are was with them when their daughter, Stacy, died, at 17 years old. Tom says,

“The last time I spoke with her was Easter Sunday. That evening she grew worse. Within a week the machines were turned off. She never took another breath. We gathered around her bed and read ‘nothing separates us from the love of God,’ and ‘he will wipe away every tear from our eyes’ and ‘I go to prepare a place for you and I will come again and take you to myself.’ Stacy’s daddy held her lifeless hand. When it comes to being a daddy of a 17 year old little girl, we never know what to do. ... We just know we would do anything to protect them. ... But she died while he held her hand. And with his heart spilling over with grief, he said, ‘Tom, I was so afraid that when this moment came I might not believe in heaven. But I do. I love her too much to let death

take her away. ... Surely God loves her at least as much as I do. Surely God will not let death take her from him.”<sup>4</sup>

In the midst of grief, at the deepest, darkest place of grief, Stacy’s father trusted that the Easter story is true. And that trust held him close to the heart of his daughter ... it held him close to the heart of God.

Look to your places of grief to trust the Easter story, the gospel says, and next it points us to look for trust in our places of fear. That’s where a group of disciples met the risen Lord – not when they were full of courage and brio, but when they huddled behind locked doors, clueless what to do after their leader’s assassination, terrified of the powers that might any minute come after them.

While few of us endure that kind of helpless, abject terror, anybody who says that they’re never afraid is either numb or lying. We all have felt the cold grip of dread at a looming disaster, or the hot flush of panic when we are in danger, or the dead-sinking certainty that we have utterly failed. We have all known at least a shadow of the fear that the disciples felt that morning in the upper room, when their teacher had been crucified, and courage was in very short supply. But the disciples leave that room transformed, transformed by the presence of the Lord: “Peace be with you,” first he says, and then he tells them, you are not the victim. You can forgive the sins of any who have wronged you ... you can forgive the sins even of those who crucified me, if you choose. You can forgive, you can find peace, you can feel courage.

Martin Luther King Jr. experienced this, not through his brilliant oratory or extraordinary organizational prowess. He came to trust in the Easter story when he was deathly afraid. One Monday evening, following a harrowing week that included arrest and threatening phone calls, King spoke at a rally. He tried to convey a sense of strength and courage, though in truth he was depressed and fear-stricken. Afterward, a woman affectionately called Mother Pollard came to the front of the church. Mother Pollard was one of the most dedicated participants in the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama. Uneducated, poor, nevertheless she was very wise. At the end of the meeting she came to him and said, “Something is wrong with you. You didn’t talk strong tonight.” Trying to disguise his fear, he disagreed; he was feeling fine as ever, he insisted. But she was not dissuaded. “You can’t fool me,” she said. “I knows something is wrong. Is it that we ain’t doing things to please you? Is it the white folks bothering you?” Before King could respond, she looked him straight in the eye and said, “I don told you we is with you all the way.’ Then her face became radiant and she said in words of quiet certainty, ‘But even if we ain’t with you, God’s gonna take care of you.’”

Long after Mother Pollard passed away, those words stayed with him. He was tortured and threatened, and tormented by doubts. But what kept him going, what gave him strength and courage, were the words of Mother Pollard, coming back again and again to give light and peace and guidance: “God’s gonna take care of you.”<sup>5</sup> In the midst of fear, Martin Luther

King discovered trust that the Easter story was true. And I don't need to tell you -- it made all the difference in the world.

If you wonder if the Easter story's true, the gospel tells us, look to your places of grief. Look to your places of fear. And finally, the gospel says, look to your places of doubt. That is where Thomas meets the risen Lord – not when he is filled with faith, but when he confesses abject skepticism that Christ is anything but dead. And while few of us have the chutzpah to admit our doubts out loud, to confess in polite company that we harbor grave suspicions at the nub of faith, most of us – I suspect the vast majority of us – have allowed our questions to surface in the privacy of our heart of hearts. Thomas is more honest than most of us will dare to be, but note well that Christ doesn't judge him for his candor. In fact the Lord rewards him for his forthrightness, his willingness to say out loud the unpopular doubt that would have been much simpler to keep to himself. And not also that, ironically, of all of the disciples, it is Thomas who is most transformed. He is the one who cries with stunning confidence, “My Lord and my God.” And blessed are we, the Lord tells us, who are able to trust without seeing ... who are able to face our deepest doubts, and lean on the Lord's strength anyway, simply because we trust that he is really and truly near. Simply because that trust can bring us freedom.

Allow me one last story.

It is my custom on Good Friday to take communion to some of our homebound members. Normally lay leaders take communion to our shut-ins every month; it is a faithful ministry. But twice a year, at Christmastime and Easter, the pastors take communion to our homebound. So two days ago, with elder Jackie Berkshire along, I took communion to four members of our congregation, old members; the youngest one was 89. I knew in each case that it might be the last time I served them communion; there is a poignancy to such visits that cannot be ignored.

Our first visit was with Mr. Thorne, a 101 year old man who is in hospice now, and rarely receives visitors. But he let us in, and we shared communion with him and his Filipino caregiver, who himself recalled the three day pilgrimage when the world stops during Holy Week in his native land. Mr. Thorne spoke appreciatively of the sermons he receives each week, and reminded us that it was his idea to have them distributed to those who cannot be here. Mr. Thorne may be at the end of his earthly life, but as Jackie put it, his eyes still danced when we admired his paintings. His apartment is surrounded by his paintings. He took up the brush for the first time when he was 82.

Our communion visits ended with Mrs. Yankee, whom we assumed was just another dear old lady, with whom we would be privileged to share the Lord's Supper. We were wrong. She was a live-wire, full of spark. She'd taught Religion and Philosophy at Smith, and then at Williams. She liked teaching at Williams, she said, because it was an all boys school then. Eventually she taught at Lake Forest College, because her now late husband had been president there. (I am such a newbie in this town; I honestly had no idea she was Doris *Cole* Yankee.)

She was among the first women elders in this church as well. The pastor at the time instructed them to wear black dresses and black hats the first time they served communion; they demurred. She told him, first I do not own a hat, and next, I don't wear black. They wore green and purple instead. Thank you, Mrs. Yankee.

After we shared communion, we visited a little more, and it came out that she was friends with Margaret Mead when she was in New York, and babysat for Reinhold and Ursula Niebuhr when she studied at Barnard in New York, and when I remarked what giants lived in those days, she sighed and said, "I know. Paul Tillich and my husband and I were dear friends; we used to summer with them for a month every year." This woman was friends with Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs! She described her favorite professor at Union Seminary in New York this way: "he could make the Old Testament stand up on its hind legs." And then, though we were supposed to be bringing the good news to her, shut-in that she is, and old, I couldn't help myself. I asked this religion professor what Holy Week and Easter meant to her. She had, of course, no idea what I was preaching on this morning.

"Oh," she said, smiling. "It has meant different things to me over time. I once used to care very much about all the facts; they meant a great deal to me. But now what matters more to me than the facts is the truth. The intangible truths are the most important ones, aren't they? Like love, for example. The intangible truths, the truths with a capital 'T' -- they are the ones that bring joy."

Is it true? Is the Easter story true, is it true with a capital T? Is it trustworthy true, life-changing true? If it is, it does not change the fact that other things also are true. The poor will always be with us. War is hell. And both death and taxes are certain.

But the resurrection shows us there are other truths too. Like the truth that love heals. And death is not the last word. And we can be buried in grief, or hide in fear, or scoff in doubt, but joy, and hope, and life can come to us anyway, simply because they are stronger. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> I credit my sister, Karen Chakoian, Pastor, First Presbyterian Church, Granville, Ohio, for the details concerning the traveling exhibit.

<sup>2</sup> *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. VI, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), pp. 174ff.

<sup>3</sup> Annette Simmons, *The Story Factor* (NY: Basic Books, 2006), pp. 31-2.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Are, Jr., Pastor, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, in a paper for the 2007 Moveable Feast preaching consortium.

<sup>5</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "Antidotes to Fear," *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), pp. 125-6.