

Too Good to Believe

Luke 24.1-12
March 27, 2016

First Christian Church

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But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Last Thursday, I did my annual Holy Week program for the Rotary Club, and asked Howard Morris to go with me. Howard has been a great friend through some tough times, which kind of makes him like the older brother I never had, and me like the obnoxious younger brother he never wanted. Like a brother, I know that whenever I ask Howard his opinion, he will tell me the pure, unvarnished truth, untempered by any concern about my feelings.

Anyway, I did the program. It had a lot of history and religious artwork. Afterwards, I asked Howard what he thought. “Well,” he said, “you didn’t disgrace the church any more than you usually do.” Coming from Howard, that was high praise.

The truth will make us free, as Jesus said. But very often, before the truth makes us free, it will make us miserable. Too often, bad news is easier to believe than good news. If the news is really good, it’s probably too good to be true. As in today’s scripture reading. But first consider this.

Moses died after leading the Israelites for 40 years. He had led them out of slavery in Egypt, and it was through Moses that God established a covenant with them based on God's commandments. When Moses died, the Israelites were getting ready to enter the Promised Land. He was a very old man, but the scripture says "his sight was unimpaired and his vigor was unabated."

By the time Mohammad died, he and his followers had taken control of the Arabian peninsula and he was acclaimed as the prophet of Allah. During one of his many battles, he suffered a severe wound, but it healed. When he died of natural causes at the age of 62, he was in the company of the favorite of his nine wives.

Buddha died when he was 80, and he died serenely. He had been raised in great luxury, but had renounced his wealth at the age of 30 in order to live a life of poverty. When he died, he also had many followers, who longed to find for themselves the deep tranquility he seemed to have discovered.

Moses, Muhammad, and Buddha each died full of years, with a devoted group of disciples determined to carry on the things they had been taught. So began the great world religions of Judaism, Islam and Buddhism.

When Jesus died, he was, by the best reckoning, only 33 years old. His public ministry had lasted no more than three years. In his home province of Galilee, he had gained a large group of disciples who had heard his words of power, witnessed his miracles of healing, and been touched by his compassion. Many thought he was the Messiah, the long-promised King of the Jews. When he undertook his climactic mission to Jerusalem, accompanied by many of those disciples, he was greeted at the gates as a conquering hero. Palm branches were thrown in front of him as he processed into the city, and many who greeted him cried out, "Hosanna—save us! Hosanna to the King of Israel!" It was wonderful, and the disciples must have been enraptured by the way he was greeted. But then things went south very fast.

The Temple in Jerusalem had become a vast, profiteering enterprise that overcharged for sacrifices, neglected the poor, and exploited the faithful. One of the first things Jesus did when he came to Jerusalem was to express his outrage in a very physical way. He overturned the tables of the money-changers, drove out the hucksters, and boldly denounced their turning his Father's house into a den of thieves. He said the leaders of the Temple were hypocrites, "whitewashed sepulchers, full of dead men's bones." He foretold the destruction of the Temple itself. In doing so, Jesus aroused an unprecedented coalition of enemies, and his death sentence was cheered in Jerusalem.

That death was ghastly. The only mercy was that the vicious flogging Jesus received beforehand led to such massive blood loss that he died sooner than most did. For all of the cruelty of crucifixion, there was political logic behind it. Rome used crucifixion not only to kill persons, but to annihilate their causes. They wanted those they regarded as threats to suffer agony and humiliation in the presence of their followers so that they would be terrified into passivity. It was never used against Roman citizens.

When someone died on a cross, they were often left up there as an object lesson. But even though the Temple authorities had connived in Jesus' death, they did not want his body hanging in public view with the Passover feast about to begin. Jerusalem needed to look its festive best for all the incoming visitors. In addition, the Sabbath, which lasted from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday, was about to begin. Any Jew who touched a corpse on the Sabbath was ritually defiled for a year, which meant that Jesus' body needed to come down before sunset. He had a few influential admirers in Jerusalem, notably Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who were given permission to remove his body from the cross. There

wasn't time to give him the attention needed, so Jesus' body was hastily wrapped in linen and placed in a tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea.

Among the Jewish people, when someone died, the body was treated with the greatest respect, since it was made in the image of God. Burying the dead was considered the greatest of all the mercies, because it was the only one the beneficiary could not repay. The body would usually be tended by family members and friends, who washed and wrapped it in linen with fragrant spices. The tomb usually consisted of a hole dug in a hillside. Then a stone was rolled in front of the entrance to keep the feral dogs and carrion birds out. After the body had decomposed, the bones would be gathered, placed in a stone box called an ossuary and laid beside those of other family members.

The people who went to the tomb that Sunday morning to finish caring for Jesus' body were some of the women among Jesus' disciples. One was Mary Magdalene, perhaps his most devoted disciple, from whom Jesus had cast seven demons [Luke 8.2]. There was Joanna, the wife of King Herod Antipas' chief steward. Jesus had also healed her [Luke 8.23]. Because Joanna was well off, she helped provide for the band of disciples who walked with Jesus from Galilee. Mary, the mother of the apostle known as James the Lesser (to distinguish him from James, the brother of John) was also there. Jesus' own mother Mary, was not; this was a task from which she was spared. The others would take care of the job. Such loving support is an old story among womankind. Beyond that, the male disciples were all in hiding. All of the disciples who had accompanied Jesus were grief-stricken and afraid. All of them wanted to get out of Jerusalem and go home as soon as possible. Maybe the following year, once things calmed down, a few of them might come back, and retrieve Jesus' bones. In every way, it seemed that the people

who hated Jesus the most had won, and those who loved him the most had lost. The movement Jesus had started was annihilated on the cross. Or so it seemed.

The Roman Empire ended crucifixion in AD 337, during the reign of Constantine, who ended the persecution of Christians and was baptized on his deathbed. But that did not end the horrific practice of crucifixion. It's one of the methods of capital punishment prescribed in the Quran [5.33]:

“But the recompense of those who fight against GOD and his apostle, and study to act corruptly in the earth, shall be, that they shall be slain, *or crucified*, or have their hands and their feet cut off on the opposite sides, or be banished the land. This shall be their disgrace in this world...”

Today, ISIS is still crucifying Christians—our brothers and sisters in Christ—in the territory under its control. Crucifixion is also allowed in Iran's criminal code, as well as in that of Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It is primarily used against Christians, and especially Christian converts. The aim is still to not only kill a person, but to annihilate a cause. But, for all of its horror, it doesn't achieve its ultimate aim, any more now than it did then.

I said that Jesus' crucifixion served the purposes of the Roman Empire and the Temple authorities. But as horrific as it was, it also served another purpose, unbeknownst to his enemies: Jesus died to save us from our sins. The Son of God freely took our sins upon himself to reconcile us to God Almighty.

In the Old Testament, the need for such reconciliation was made clear. There was a complex system of sacrifices designed to cleanse away moral and ritual uncleanness. But, in the end, how could a dead goat compensate for desperate human sin? Something much more was needful. The Book of the Prophet Isaiah foretells of a Suffering Servant who

...was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;

...But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.

All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have all turned to our own way,

and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all...

he bore the sin of many,

and made intercession for his transgressors. [Isaiah 53.3-6, 12b].

That Suffering Servant was Jesus. The Apostle Paul, who first became a Christian through the divine intercession of Christ and the witness of other Christians, wrote,

For I handed on to you as of first importance that which I in turn had received: that Christ died *for our sins* in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared...[I Corinthians 15.3-5a]

Jesus died for us.

The other great religions have such beautiful symbols. The Star of David for Judaism; the crescent moon and star for Islam; the lotus flower for Buddhism. Our symbol is a cross, an instrument of suffering and death. It is unthinkable that such a thing should be the sign of our faith, unless it is also the sign of our redemption—the very symbol of redemption, of Jesus' love for us all.

When the women arrived at the tomb that Sunday, the boulder blocking the entrance had been rolled away. They looked inside, and saw the linen shroud and head covering. But of his cold, stiff, blood-scabbed body, there was nothing to be

seen. Suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes appeared. At first, Jesus' friends were afraid, but the visitors asked, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen. Why didn't you believe him when he told you he would?" The women rushed back to Jerusalem, to the men hidden away and plotting their exits. The men thought what the women said was "an idle tale," a polite way of saying they thought they were lying or hysterical. How much credibility could they have? In Judea, in those days, women couldn't even testify in court. Peter decided to go look for himself. He was never the sharpest knife in the drawer, and there had been that terrible act of cowardice three nights earlier, when he denied knowing Jesus three times. Still, despite that act, for which he was ashamed, and despite the risk, Peter decided to go see for himself. He saw that the tomb was empty. He saw the discarded linen. He wondered what it meant.

That is our scripture reading for this year's Easter Sunday. In the weeks to come, we will be describing the accounts of those who saw the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ face to face. But for today, there is an open tomb, and a missing body, and dazzling messengers saying that Jesus is risen from the dead. There are women who believe, and men who think the women are deluded, and Peter, who doesn't know what to think, because what the women said was all too good to believe.

There is a key factor in today's scripture that we must not overlook. "*Remember,*" the angels said. "*He told you,*" they said. "*If you had remembered,* you would understand," they said. Jesus had warned his disciples that when they came to Jerusalem, he would suffer and die. That had all been proven too terribly true. But he had also told them *that he would rise from the dead*. If the all-too-believable bad first part been proven true, was it not possible that the hard-to-believe good second part could also be true?

Here on earth, in our fallen state, we are inclined to always believe the worst. We think we are wise to the ways of the world; we know when something is too good to be true. It is the Pollyannas and the spinmeisters and the con artists who want us to believe that things are better than they could possibly be. It is the children, and the poor, deluded people who believe, in the midst of heart-stopping pain, that everything is still going to be fine. But here you are, on Easter. You really believe, don't you, that Jesus is risen from the dead? You really believe, don't you, that good will ultimately triumph over evil? You really believe, don't you, that Easter is about the truth—about a truth that cannot be twisted, about a hope that cannot be extinguished, about a life that does not perish? Jesus was killed; but then, Jesus rose from the dead. You believe that, don't you?

Thanks be to God, so do I.

The truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ does not rest on “myths,” or “narratives,” but on radically transformed human lives whose effect on the world are a matter of historical fact. Peter, who one terrible night denied Jesus out of fear, became a lion of courage and bore witness to Jesus' resurrection for the rest of his days. The Romans killed him. Paul, whose own encounter with the disciples of Jesus began with his trying to arrest as many of them as possible, became Christ's greatest apostle. The Romans killed him, too. In fact, for two and a half centuries, the Romans tried to kill or shut up hundreds of thousands of Christians. But they kept multiplying. Within two and a half centuries, this “ragtag bunch of nobodies from the civilizational outback” had touched so many hearts and changed so many minds that, in the worlds of George Weigel,

...the most powerful man in the world, the Roman Emperor Constantine, joined the winning side. How did that happen? It didn't happen because of better myth-

making. It happened because those first Christians met a young rabbi who promised that, should they believe in him, each of them would become a ‘spring of water welling up to eternal life’ [John 4.14].’ Then came what seemed complete catastrophe: his crucifixion. But they met that teacher again as the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, and were infused by his Spirit.

After that, they told the truth of what they had ‘seen and heard.’ And thereby changed the world.

This is how we come to believe. First, we are told of the living Jesus Christ. If we are like the first visitors to the tomb, we believe the messengers. If we are like those who hear it later, we may think it an idle tale, too good to believe. But if we want the living Lord Jesus Christ in our lives, he will be in them, and we will come to know him first hand. If you have not yet come to know of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, look around. There are many of us here who would rejoice to make the introduction. We have good news to tell you. And that good news is true.

Amen.