



“TOO GOOD *NOT* TO BE TRUE”

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Easter Sunday

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. (Luke 24:1-12)

Christ is Risen! (“He is risen indeed!”) Christ is risen! (“He is risen indeed!”) Now: do you believe it? If you do, then everything has changed for you. But I’ll tell you, for most people, what we’re told at Easter seems just “too good to be true.”

Two of the most beloved characters in the history of children’s television shows are Captain Kangaroo, who was on television for 30 years, and Mr. Rogers, he of the long-sleeved sweater who wants to be our neighbor. Rev. Tom Long tells the story of a friend’s young son who was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy watched them religiously; he loved them. Then one day Mister Rogers announced he would be visiting Captain Kangaroo. This young boy was beside himself. His two heroes, together on the same show. Every morning he asked, “Is today the day Mister Rogers visits Captain Kangaroo?” Finally the day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. And there they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo – together. The excited young boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, he got up and left the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, “What is it? Is something wrong?” “It’s too good!” the boy replied in amazement. “It’s just *too* good!”

Maybe that's why we have a hard time trusting resurrection. It's just "too good." How can anything so good be true? Really, it's much easier to believe in Good Friday. Don't you think? We've all been around long enough that we're extremely reluctant to let our hopes rise up too high. We've "seen some hot, hot blazes come down to smoke and ash."¹ We've had our share of heartbreaks and disappointments, broken dreams, if not outright tragedies. Every day we hear about brutal things and the violence done against innocent victims. We live in a Good Friday world. It's our reality. So, sadly, Good Friday is the most believable part of the Easter story.

The violence in Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, was inexpressibly painful to watch, but it was a graphic reminder of how barbarous those Romans were when their interests were threatened. As for us, we need only to look back on 9/11, or Sandy Hook, or look at the bizarre behavior of the North Koreans, or think of the atrocities in Syria, to see how Good Friday tragedies condition our thinking. Good Friday we understand all too well. Easter Sunday – now that's the day that we have trouble believing.

And we're not alone. Remember: not even the disciples believed it. Every one of the accounts tells of their disbelief. The evangelist Luke writes to us that early on Easter morning the women walked to the tomb, somber, grieving, but determined to do their duty, carrying herbs for embalming. What they find is *not* what they expect and they don't understand it at all. The stone has been rolled to the side and the burial garment is neatly folded on the slab. And two dazzling strangers ask them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The answer is obvious. They have no idea they are looking for the living. They're looking for their beloved, dead friend. What are the women expecting? They're expecting more Good Friday. They didn't have their hopes up for anything else. When the Romans kill you, you stay dead. The women didn't expect anything other than death.

And neither do we. No one expected, or believed, in resurrection. That would be "just too good." Right from the very first, people doubted it. Some said he wasn't really dead. They drugged him. He passed out. They put him in the tomb. Cool slab, middle of the night, he woke up in the dark, and just rolled back the stone and walked out. You know, like Bruce Willis in one of the *Die Hard* movies. He gets hit by a truck, falls off an airplane, cut by broken glass, shot a couple of times, bleeding profusely, but still has the strength to jump up and knock down all the bad guys. I hate to disappoint, but *that* isn't real. You ever been hit by a truck? You don't just bounce off and keep going. And you don't just wake up and push back a stone after you've been scourged by the Romans and had nails pounded through your hands and feet.

Other people said, "Hey, this is a plot! His disciples stole the body, hid it somewhere, made up the story. They're just fooling us." But I don't buy that, either. You ever try to keep a secret that big among a group of eleven men and five or six women? Like Benjamin Franklin told the King of France, "Three can keep a secret, if two of them are dead." And as we've seen, none of them believed it. The women didn't believe it. They had to encounter Christ for themselves. And the most hard-headed people to convince were those disciples who were frozen in fear that they would be discovered. You think old Peter, who had just denied Jesus three times, could have hatched such a plot? I don't think so.

This group of women – Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, some others with them – drop face-down in the dirt before these two dazzling strangers. And these messengers tell them: “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.” “*Remember* what he told you...”

“Remember” is one of the most important words in the Bible. To “remember” is to keep God’s covenant, be God’s people, receive God’s promises. To “forget” is to sin, to lose God, to lose yourself. A person with amnesia has no identity, can’t tell you who she is. “Remember what he told you!” the dazzlers tell them – and, oh yeah, they remember.

And then they run to tell the guys – hiding, afraid – what they’ve seen and heard. It’s the first Easter sermon, preached by women, we should note. And like most sermons, no one seems too convinced by it. The guys are still living in a Good Friday world. They think this is an idle tale. But the women become the angels of the resurrection the men need to hear. “Why are you hiding in this room? Something’s happened! Something we didn’t see coming. The tomb is empty. Christ is risen!”

As Luke tells it, the story of the resurrection is still just a rumor. These two amazing guys tell these women who tell the disciples who pass the story to me and now I’m telling you. I’m telling you. But we’re all so enmeshed in our dance with death, so cynical about the possibilities of a happy ending, a different outcome, a new beginning, a different world, that we just can’t see it.

What do those weary disciples say? “It’s just too good,” they say. “It’s just too good to be true,” they say to themselves, then to each other, then to the women. “Get outta here with your idle tales!” they say. They have no reason to believe. These are “hard-headed realists.” They are convinced that they know how life works.

To his credit, Peter runs to see for himself, and what he sees is the same ‘nothing’ the women saw. Old impetuous Peter runs to the tomb, bends over and sees the linens folded on the slab, goes back home amazed but not quite sure what to think. Friends, think of it as God’s teachable moment. Easter caught the women, and Peter, and the disciples off guard. First, God had to get their attention. The angelic announcement makes them perk up and wonder. God is preparing them to meet Christ risen. First they are surprised, amazed, engaged, and thus prepared. Then, contrary to everything they know about reality, they see him.

And here’s the Easter point. Once they meet the risen Christ, it’s no longer “too good to be true.” It’s simply *true*. Once they encounter him they know: *anything* is possible. Once they encounter Christ raised, it doesn’t matter what they *thought* they knew about reality. God is showing them that there is more to life than what they thought. The women, and Peter, and the disciples, all had to *re-frame* everything they thought they knew about reality. For this is no longer be a “Good Friday” world for them – and it should no longer be for us, either.

And here’s what you and I need to grasp about Easter. There is far more to this life, this world, than we had even dared to dream. God is telling us that what we see in Easter is “too good *not* to be true.” The final, deepest reality is not death. It is redemption. Resurrection.

Remember what the Apostle Paul said? “Death has been swallowed up in victory! Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Do you see this? Friends, Paul is trash talking. He’s mocking death, our final enemy. Because Easter shows us that death has been defeated. And it is too good. Too good *not* to be true.

But Easter is not just about death, of course. It’s about life. Easter is more than about Jesus raised from the dead. Yes, Easter is the promise that our lives will be redeemed. Yes, Easter reveals that there is a life with God awaiting us that is far better than you can imagine. There is more. God is telling us that everything we thought we knew about this life is incomplete. That there will come a Time-Beyond-All-Time when we will be with God, when all heartbreak, pain and tragedy will not just be behind us, but we will at last understand it. When we will no longer see in part, in fragments, but we will understand fully even as God understands it all now.

There will come a day-beyond-earthly-days when love will be all-in-all, and it will be like blinders have been raised from our sight, and everything we’ve experienced here as tragedy will be shown to be infused with a love and a meaning that turns it all into a joy beyond measure.

Frederick Buechner, whom I regard as the greatest Christian writer of the past thirty years, gave a series of lectures on preaching called “Telling the Truth: the Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale.” In one lecture, he describes the tragedy of the gospel, of this Good Friday world of tragedy, of defeat, of crucifixion, which is often all we see. And in another lecture, he speaks of the Gospel as Comedy, as when the angel tells the hundred-year-old Sarah that she will bear a child, and she laughs in his face. But in the end, Buechner says, the Gospel ultimately is like a fairy tale. It is like a fairy tale because just when we’re expecting defeat, victory is won. That, in the end, evil can never prevail against the good. What we thought was “Too Good” to be true, is revealed to be “too good *not* to be true.”²

And Buechner says this about our world: “This is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle... Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name... That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still.”

Is this so difficult to believe? If we don’t believe it, then we people of faith need to have our understanding stretched. Buechner writes, “Scientists now speak of intelligent life among the stars, of how at the speed of light there is no time, of consciousness as *more* than just an epiphenomenon of the physical brain. Doctors now speak seriously about life after death, and not just the mystics anymore, but the housewife, the stockbroker, the high-school senior speak about an inner world where reality becomes transparent to a reality *realer* still.”

Because of God, this life of ours is more than what Jesus’ crucifixion on a Friday afternoon would have us believe. There is more. We catch glimpses of it, don’t we? And most especially,

we see the truth of life on Easter Sunday. On this Easter Sunday we need first to remember what Jesus told us: he is raised!

On this day we need to remember all the promises of scripture, which to be honest, most of us don't remember, don't know, don't study, don't even bother to read much anymore. The Bible is like a love letter God has sent you that – for some reason – you can't be bothered to open. Which is very said, as I know many of you are living with the hard-as-hell-reality of Good Friday anguish when it's hard to believe in any good news right now.

But listen! There were these two dazzling guys who told these women, who told these disciples, who whispered to me this morning some amazing news. And I believe them. Just maybe, *maybe*, you can too. And if so, it will turn the pain of your Good Friday world into immeasurable Joy.

And the news is that “Christ is risen!” Can you respond? (He is risen indeed). Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed). Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed).

And for the life of you, I hope you believe it.

May we pray? Move us from rumor to reality, O God. Crack open our skepticism and cynicism and the places in our hearts hardened by harsh experience. Let Christ ‘Easter’ in us. Let Christ rise in us. Let him rise in our church. Let him bring a new creation out of the death of our broken hearts, and fill us with a passion for your life which neither death nor hell can quench. On this Easter Sunday, fill us with hope and the expectation that we will see the risen Christ, so that we leave this place looking for him among the living, recognizing him as he walks beside us or meets us in the street. Let us see him whenever we gather as his disciples in this upper room, whenever we break bread together, whenever we're asked to give for your purposes, whenever someone needs compassion and forgiveness. Then we ourselves will know the joy of Christ risen and believe that with you, all things are possible. Lord, in your mercy... hear our prayer! Amen.

1. A line from Joni Mitchell's “Help Me, I Think I'm Falling”

2. Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale*.