

Easter Fears

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Text: Matthew 28:1-10

Ordinarily, Easter is not a day to get too serious. I mean it quite seriously for, unless my reading is wrong, most people do not want to get too serious about Easter. Certainly, any assessment of the way the culture plans the day's activities indicates more a mood of festival and frivolity than serious-mindedness—egg hunts for the children, decorated baskets and chocolate bunnies, Easter brunch for the adults, annual parade down Fifth Avenue, Easter sales at the shopping malls and auto dealerships. Even the Easter Sunday comics confirm the suspicion. Nor do I mean to pass judgment on that. The God I conceptualize is one who would rather enjoy, I imagine, people celebrating the resurrection with a degree of levity and folly. I had an associate minister in Louisville who surprised me one Easter morning when we were standing robed and stoled and ready to enter the sanctuary crowded with Easter worshippers. The organ was already playing the prelude, "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today." My sermon notes were in hand; my mind was seriously rehearsing every detail of the service, for after all the Easter service is serious business for the preacher. My hand was literally on the swinging door leading into the sanctuary when my ministerial colleague said, "Wait. . . wait. . . I haven't given you your Easter present yet." And he handed me a chocolate cross.

Even in church Easter is a day on which we would rather not get too serious about the faith's most serious assertion, choosing, most of us, to sing the Easter hymns, parrot the ancient prayers, and claim the resurrection assertion all rather unquestioningly. All of this is out of some fear, I suspect, of what we might find if we ever got too serious. And so, by and large, Easter is a day to skate on the surface, enjoy the day off, soak in the warm sunshine, smell the flowers, and revel in the hope of spring weather ahead.

Contrast our day with the day described in the scripture reading. Now I know you and I have the benefit of a lot of history in between, a lot of time to reflect and to question. We are better informed in many ways than those two Marys who went early in the morning to see the sepulcher, but note their response. Utter terror! And we would be terrified, too. For the way Matthew describes it, there are all the marks of a Steven Spielberg horror movie—the setting a graveyard early in the morning, an ominous mist hovering over the earth, extra terrestrial bodies guarding the tomb. Then comes the timid appearance of two grief-stricken women trespassers already terrified over the events of the past week, only to discover to their additional horror that the body has disappeared. And finally to top it all off, with almost too much melodrama, Matthew sets the scene against the backdrop of an earthquake. Not just any old earthquake either, but a "great earthquake." It is clear that the writer is trying to convey a mood of fear, understandably so. For not only is

death itself the ultimate dread, but the circumstances of this particular death make it even more fearsome. No wonder the women were overcome with fear. No wonder the angel's word to them was "Fear not." No wonder that the first full sentence the risen Christ spoke was, "Do not be afraid." Only contrast the mood of that day with the mood of our Easter day, where the mood is much more carefree and frivolous.

Is the difference only that we know more and therefore fear less, or is it that we have learned, as we have learned to make jokes about death, not to allow ourselves to get too serious about Easter? Is there a deep-seated, deeply suspected fear of what we just might find if we ever got really serious?

The first fear, which frivolity serves to conceal though not completely, is, of course, the fear that it is not true. True the body is gone, true the grave clothes are still there, true the report is that he is risen, but the truth is that the soldiers took the body—or the disciples, as some said in Matthew's report. Or, as the Lucan account has it, "Others called it an idle tale." It is the fear that the women were mistaken, the church wrong, Christ is not risen—the fear that it was all too good to be true. There is the added fear of what that would do to our hope, and to our ethics, and to our sense of fairness, and to our system of values, and to everything else we have come to trust and hold dear—if Christ be not raised.

Nobody has postured the dilemma any more descriptively than has Flannery O'Connor's fictional character in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, where the Misfit, who is a horrible and notorious outlaw, has terrorized and finally murdered a family that has had an auto accident on a lonely rural road. The fugitive is now holding hostage the grandmother. She is grief stricken and afraid for her own life, and she cries out, "Jesus. . . Jesus." The Misfit answers, "Jesus was the only one who ever raised the dead, and he shouldn't have done it. He's thrown everything off balance. If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow him, and if he didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you've got left the best way you can by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him." And with a gruesomeness the normal mind cannot imagine, but also a candidness which is too frightening for most of us, the Misfit speaks the truth. If Christ is not risen, then our Easter faith is a horrible hoax, and nothing makes much sense except to grab what we can in the few pages of the calendar we have left, and that (if one is serious) is a frightening revelation.

The second fear is in contrast to the first, which says, "It is not true. . . ." The second fear, equally terrifying in its own way, is the fear that it is true. What the women saw and said is true. Now if one is serious-minded, that, too, is a terrifying revelation. There used to be a television series called "The Twilight Zone." It came on every week and was a moderately horrible horror show. Once in that series, there was a story about a town in the old West into which one day a stranger rode. He was a snake oil salesman type, only in this horror story the salesman was selling something much more intriguing. For ten dollars he would raise someone from the dead. Of course, the stranger became the overnight talk of the town. Though many were skeptical, many others were

curious enough to risk the money, a lot of money in those days, to have someone raised from the dead. Only then the story takes a curious twist. As the story unfolds, people start coming to the stranger in secrecy at night, offering twenty dollars if he will *not* raise certain individuals from the dead. And, of course, it does not take much imagination to speculate why so many were willing to pay such hush money. The price has gone up, but the word is that people still pay hush money (sometimes even religious people pay hush money), and it doesn't take much imagination to figure out why. Consequently, even for the disciples as for you and me, it could come as a terrifying revelation that the resurrection is true because, to be serious about it, if it is true the Misfit is right again: "If he did what he said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw everything away and follow him—because Jesus has thrown everything off balance." Now for anyone serious minded, it is a terrifying thought that the resurrection is true.

Not only is it true, then, that Jesus was raised from the dead and that in that event rests the hope of our resurrection. His resurrection also means (if one seriously believes it) that the world most of us live in, believe in, rely upon, and accommodate ourselves to is radically thrown off balance like some giant earthquake. Jesus' death, you see, is manageable, understandable, and containable, as any death is all of those things. As painful as death is, it is predictable and therefore somehow manageable. It is the resurrection that throws things off balance—"blows the mind," we say, because the resurrection removes things from our control, prediction, and understanding. Remember that those first disciples, when they became frightened and confused, were the very ones who forsook Jesus on Good Friday—could not wait with him even one hour. "When the going got tough, they got going"—back to the world, back to the predictable and manageable way the world was before Jesus. And don't you know they were bound to wonder, terrified, at the announcement of the resurrection—wondering if they would have to answer for their faithlessness, their cowardice.

The death of Jesus was painful for them but was also a relief in a way. They could manage their death somehow; they would in time perhaps understand. Possibly now, even three days later, they were beginning to see how predictable it had all been. A Christ who lived, on the other hand, would be totally unpredictable, turning up next no telling where or when, utterly unmanageable, beyond all understanding, and, worse still, demanding no telling what. A Christ who lived would still be around to nag away at them to see things God's way, and, for people with vast investments in seeing things as they presently are, that is pretty scary.

Seriously now, to accept the love of God which casts out all fear is a very tough position to take. Most of us are not there, at least not all the time. For us the grave still poses a dreaded fear. Most of us remain a bit terrified at the very thought of total obedience to the demands of the risen Christ for intellectual surrender, and moral surrender, and economic surrender. We are too afraid, frankly, to live our days (even according to our limited understanding) on what it means that nothing—neither death, nor powers, nor principalities, nor persecution, nor things present, nor things to come—can separate us from

the love of God in Christ Jesus. Most of us cowl before total obedience to any such serious assertion. Consequently, Easter for literally millions is a day to skate on the surface—to immerse oneself in the delight of the festival but not to get too serious because, quite frankly, the whole idea (as for those two women in the garden) is too utterly terrifying to contemplate for too long, or too seriously. Either way (it is true/it is not true), it is a horrendous idea.

Now I do not know where you are on the Easter spectrum of belief (five perhaps, maybe a seven, some days a three); it depends, if you are like me, on what day it is. I do know there is no proof for it. As much as we try with old Aquinas to prove God intellectually or in our time to squeeze out of a shroud of Turin some fiber evidence that will speak convincingly to a scientific-minded age that it is true, there is no proof. It is still a leap of faith. Still, a day to profess our belief but a day also to pray, "Lord, help my unbelief." We are caught between finding it too good to be true, and if it is true, too demanding by implication. While for those who can only skate on the surface—those who cannot yet sing the Easter hymns with gusto, preferring to schedule the day with diversionary lightheartedness and laughter—there comes the biggest Easter surprise of all, and I say it with total seriousness. It is the assertion of Easter that God is in all that with you as well. Easter, you see, is not just God's private gift to a few pious insiders who profess the creeds. Easter is not only as it might appear, as we might predict, for the well dressed and well heeled to sing their hallelujas at sunrise services and in crowded sanctuaries. If we are to take seriously the scriptural assertions of the resurrection, Easter was as well for those who could not yet bring themselves to believe—who indeed laughed and made cruel jokes and placed a mock crown upon his head, even as he breathed his last. Yes, it was even for those who knew not what they were doing. Easter was also for Pilate who washed his hands of any involvement, and for Judas who felt betrayed and who in turn betrayed, and for Peter who fell asleep. It was for the soldiers who simply did their duty and asked no questions as they killed a man, for the women too terrified to believe because it all appeared to them too good to be true, and for all the countless unnamed others who just had other things on their mind that day. Easter is not only for the serious-minded, you see. Easter is as well for the simple-minded, and the close-minded, and the literal-minded, and the feeble-minded, and the narrow-minded. The surprising Easter assertion is that the future God has in store for creation defies all our predictions, controls, and accommodations. "Jesus has thrown everything off balance." Nothing is as expected, and the truly amazing surprise of Easter is that God's grace does not depend upon our ability to fathom it. Grief turns into jubilation, despair into hope. The powerful are brought down. The lowly are lifted up. Spears are turned into pruning hooks. It is not the righteous who are saved, but sinners. "Jesus has thrown everything off balance" by his love, and, without any trace of irreverence, can we not say there is something downright comical about it?

Remember Dante's *Divine Comedy*? Every college freshman has had to struggle through those scholarly lines, certainly one of literature's most serious allegories. Well, if you were able to stick with Dante until the end, you remember that after Dante has made the tortuous ascent from hell to purgatory and

then draws close to the celestial sphere, he suddenly hears a sound he has never heard before. Stopping and listening, he writes, *Me sembrava un riso del universo* ("It sounded like the laughter of the universe"). Now please do not misunderstand. Easter is faith's most serious assertion, but can we not hear in it a kind of holy laughter? This unknown nobody from nowhere, disclaiming every conventional rule of protocol, defying every earthly power, rewriting religion, challenging tradition, reversing values, deliberately choosing the disinherited and the heartbroken, proclaiming hope to all who had no hope, forgiving the undeserving, finally tortured and put to death, sealed in a tomb—the assertion that this is the one God has raised from the dead has thrown everything everyone ever thought off balance. Can we not see in it a kind of holy humor? Not a cruel joke but a joke more in the sense of a surprise gift, something nobody expected—or deserved. No wonder some feared it too good to be true, while others fear it too true to be good (in terms of its demands). No wonder so many take Easter so lightly, for it is indeed a fearsome assertion. And all the while, God laughs, like some grandparent on the porch swing watching the children at play—so serious at times, so carefree at others. God laughs because God knows what they do not know, cannot know, that the delivery truck is on the way with a gift beyond all expectation.

Harvey Cox says, "Some people, no matter how hard you try to explain it, simply don't get a joke." The Easter story, he says, is like that. There is no point in trying to explain it or make it more plausible. Easter is the moment when the laughter of the universe breaks through. It fades, of course, like a distant radio signal on a stormy night. A lot of noise and static crowds it out, but, once we have heard it, we know from then on it is there. Cox calls it, in all seriousness, "God's last laugh."