

***r u kidding?* Part 6: What if it's true?**

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Scripture: Matthew 28:1-10

"Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" We heard Jesus' disciples ask this question on Ash Wednesday. In response, Jesus called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*" (Mt 18:1-4)

Over the last six weeks, we've tested Jesus' assumption, looking at some of his hardest parables, stories, and actions, viewing them through the eyes of a child to see if it changes anything. In each case, we've discovered that the obscure becomes comprehensible, the disturbing becomes delightful, and even those stories and sayings that seem most at odds with our ethical or theological sensibilities, when seen through the eyes of a child, suddenly snap into focus and become hallmarks of God's amazing love and grace. Is it any wonder that Jesus wanted us to look out at the whole world this way?

For Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven isn't simply a future reality to be experienced after we die, but is a reality that is already deeply embedded in our world and may be experienced in the here-and-now. The core of Jesus' message, properly translated, is "The Kingdom of Heaven is already here! Change your whole way of thinking [Greek: *metanoia*] and believe the good news!" (Matthew 4:17; Mark 1:15). According to Jesus, we are already living our eternal life. Our experience of heaven has already started – not in anywhere close to its fullness, certainly – but the good news is that *heaven is here for those who will welcome it like a child.*

Now, on Easter morning, we take another look at the greatest and most perplexing story ever told. If we view this story through the eyes of a child, we can expect to find some astonishingly good, if unexpected, news this morning. When you walk out of the Sanctuary you may see Easter through a very different lens than you have before. Or you'll remember a few things about Easter that you knew as a child but had forgotten with the passing years. Perhaps even, you may go from *viewing* the Easter story differently to *living into* the new reality to which the Easter story invites us. An experience of heaven *on earth.*

Of course, you might rightfully ask, "*Which* Easter story are you talking about?" Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John each offer very different accounts of Easter. Claims made in one gospel tend to contradict those made in another. In Matthew's version, for instance, two women named Mary encounter an angel who rolls away stone at the entrance to Jesus' tomb before their very eyes. John's version tells of only one Mary at the tomb (Mary Magdalene) and the stone has already been rolled away when she gets there. In Luke's version, Jesus appears to some followers on the road to Emmaus and also to the disciples in Jerusalem. In Matthew's version, Jesus tells the two Marys that he will meet his disciples many miles from Jerusalem, in Galilee.

Here is the first instance where seeing things through the eyes of a child may be helpful. If a bunch of children were to report on something incredibly exciting that completely upended their understanding of how the world worked, and how God worked, and how their lives should work in response, would you expect those children to tell you the exact same story of what happened down to the finest details – even if they witnessed the exact same thing at the same time? Of course not. Not even adults who witness something out of the ordinary describe what happened the exact same way, as any policeman will tell you who takes depositions at the scene of an accident. No, if all the stories match in each and every detail, that's when you know there's a conspiracy. That's when you know people have carefully gone over those details and agreed upon what happened to whom and when.

The fact that the gospels are so all-over-the-map in their descriptions of Easter morning, yet contain distinctive common threads, may not prove that the story of Easter is true but does tend to disprove the idea that the Jesus' resurrection was some giant conspiracy foisted upon the world by his disciples. The fact that each of the disciples down to their dying day insisted that Jesus was resurrected also lends credibility. In fact, all but one disciple (besides Judas Iscariot) are said to have been crucified, beheaded, skinned alive, hacked, speared, stoned, or clubbed to death for preaching the good news of Christ's resurrection. The only one who is believed to have died of natural causes is John who, according to the tradition, spent many years in prison and exile for his proclamation of the gospel. Considering the fact that followers of every other messianic figure who arose in the first century all dispersed and were never heard from again, the fact that Jesus' disciples would travel the world from Ethiopia, to India, to as far away as Britain according to some traditions, says something about the strength of their belief.

Clearly, something seems to have happened on Easter morning 2,000 years ago that set the disciples' hearts on fire. Whatever happened convinced them that everything Jesus said while he walked the earth had been true, and that he continued to live on in spiritual form as the Spirit of the Living Christ, or "Holy Spirit."

Are you convinced that Christ is alive, that the Holy Spirit of the Living Christ is present, and that you, like the disciples, are invited into ongoing relationship with, and guidance from, God through the Spirit?

The fact of the matter is that none of us really believe in the resurrection of Jesus until we have some direct experience of death and resurrection in our lives. We never believe in the continuing presence and power of the Holy Spirit until we discover that God has "made a way outta no way" in our lives, at the very point where we had given up all hope and surrendered to the darkness. It doesn't matter how much authority we ascribe to the Bible, or to the apostles, or to the Christian tradition throughout the ages. The resurrection never really travels from the head to the heart, and from the heart to the soul, until we experience it for ourselves.

Here again, children are helpful. If you tell your child something new that has the potential to dramatically impact her life, what does she do? She may believe in your authority as a parent, but that new reality is not really going to make a difference in her behavior or the way she views the world until it becomes part of her lived reality in some way.

When we told our younger daughter, Maren, in 2008, that we were moving from Scottsdale, Arizona, to Omaha, Nebraska, she pretty much thought her life was over. You who were around at that time and remember my family standing in this Chancel after the unanimous vote of the congregation to bring me here, may remember that everyone in our family was smiling from ear-to-ear except one. Though Melanie and I gave Maren all kinds of good and logical reasons why we were so confident that she was going to love Omaha, it wasn't until she moved to Omaha and Omaha became part of her lived experience that she actually believed enough of what we had said to embrace life here. Quickly she came to consider life in Omaha an upgrade over Scottsdale, especially after meeting some nice boys here!

With respect to Easter, it's not until some deep form of death and resurrection enters your lived experience that the meaning and significance of Easter begins to dawn on you in a way you can trust and embrace enough to order your life according to the reality of Christ's ongoing presence and power.

Has Easter yet become part of your lived experience enough to embrace it, and live by its light? Realistically, most of us must answer "No." Otherwise, we would be living lives that look a lot more like the lives of Jesus' disciples.

I say this not to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed. If Easter Sunday hasn't yet grabbed hold of you in a way that draws you like a moth to flame, then perhaps death and resurrection have not yet come across your path in such a way that your lived experience would bring to you to more than intellectual belief. That's not a bad thing. In fact, you should consider yourself quite lucky that life hasn't hurt you badly enough, or the bottom hasn't dropped out in your life deeply enough, or the way forward hasn't become dark and dangerous enough, for this death-and-resurrection thing to prove itself true to your experience. You should feel glad about this, not guilty or ashamed!

Yet if the Reality of Easter hasn't yet made an impact on your life, provoking Easter *belief*, there is a way to begin to live by Easter *faith*. The way you do it is ... surprise, surprise ... to do what a child does. You imagine. Children use imagination in order to inhabit a space that hasn't yet become part of their lived experience. They play dress up, or have tea parties, or play astronaut, or dragon-slayer, or any number of games to help them envision what it would be like to live in a world they have not directly experienced.

Back to our daughter Maren, when she was younger, she used to play incessantly with cardboard bricks and wooden blocks she'd assemble into forts, buildings, houses and other elaborate structures, using blankets, towels, sheets, and whatever else she could get her hands on to provide roofs, walls, floor coverings, and so on. She'd set up one structure, admire it for a few minutes, then knock it down and create a new one. By the end of the day, her room would be a complete mess, with blocks, bricks, and fabric strewn everywhere. It drove us crazy sometimes. When outdoors, Maren was fixated not so much on buildings, but bugs. Pretty much any animal that crept, crawled, slithered, or flew past her was the object of her attention – and the object of her entrapment. She'd catch her creepy-crawlies or flying things and bring them into her room to "live with her" in the structures she was continually erecting. That practice could drive us crazier than her penchant for building.

And wouldn't you know ... Maren is graduating from college next month with a degree in biology and a minor in environmental science, and she's actively exploring architecture and

environmental design as a future course of study. Her favorite subject is a relatively new area of environmental design called “biomimicry” in which design and production of materials, structures, and systems are modeled on biological entities and processes. Imagine that. Maren was combining these interests at age 5. (As her father, I think this makes her a child genius.)

As psychologist James Hillman explains in his book, *The Soul's Code*, sometimes children are powerfully drawn to a sense of call and purpose but are too young to adequately understand or assimilate it into their lives. However, if you pay attention to the ways they play, and even the ways they “act out,” it often betrays the seeds of something trying to grow within them.

Like children, the seeds of Easter lie within each one of us. We may not have experienced death-and-resurrection for ourselves yet, but because we human beings are products of both matter and spirit, our souls already know all about Easter love and grace, Easter joy, Easter death-and-resurrection at their deepest levels. All it takes is an outer-world experience for our inner-world Reality to start to push its way up within us until our outer and inner worlds are in alignment.

Sometimes the use of a little imagination helps to align those realities. Ask yourself, “What if the story is true?” then order your life as best you can around what you would imagine would be the implications if the story is true. Keep what clicks, discard what doesn't, and keep adjusting, and re-imagining.

How does life look differently under Easter Reality? Only you can say for sure, as Easter hits each one of us in its own particular way, and calls to us differently, but for what it's worth, here are a few of the implications that I've found and believe to be more than personal to me.

If the Easter story is true, then:

- There is life after death.
- Therefore, you need not be afraid of death.
- You need not be afraid of death even if you are far from God. (Who among us isn't?)
- You need not be afraid because the Cross convicts all of humanity of sin, and the Empty Tomb, along with God's continuing loving presence as the Holy Spirit among us, assures us that all people are loved beyond their wildest imagination.
- If we need not fear God when we die, then neither should we fear God when we are alive, at least not in any way except the *biblical* way where fear really means “awestruck reverence and wonder.”
- The Cross also assures us that God knows, and chooses to experience in God's own Self our deepest pain. God knows pain that is so deep it is like that of a parent losing an only child. Yet the Empty Tomb assures us that God does not simply experience our pain but transforms it in such a way that the pain becomes not an ending but the source of a new beginning. Our pain contains the seeds of new life when we allow the Spirit to sprinkle its water on them.
- Easter Reality signals a basic graciousness about life that exists within our great struggles, showing us that amidst the greatest darkness the world can produce, one may encounter a Presence for whom “darkness is not dark,” for whom “the night is as bright as the day.” (Psalm 139:12)

One of the most wonderful things about the Bible is that it continually invites us to imagine the world as God sees it. The Bible doesn't do it perfectly, as it's still the product of the Holy Spirit inspiring mere mortals with its vision. Nevertheless, there are places in the Bible that seem to produce a clear view of the Reality to which Easter points – including parts of the Bible that were written long before Jesus came into the world. To me, Psalm 23 acts like a child inviting us to imagine what it is like to live in light of Easter even though it was written a thousand years light *before* Easter. The picture of heaven-on-earth that Psalm 23 describes suggests that Jesus did not open the doorway to relationship with God, but revealed the open door most fully.

So if the Easter Story hasn't hit you between the eyes yet, then maybe you'll allow King David to invite you into Easter's world:

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

“He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul.

“Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and staff, they comfort me.

“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.” When I know that God's love and grace extends not only to me, but overflows into the presence of my enemies, then I know that Jesus' command to love my enemies is trustworthy. And why wouldn't it be? For the Cross and Empty Tomb show me that God loved me from eternity, well before I ever considered God my Beloved. When this realization dawns not only on my head, but my heart, and brings both into alignment with my *soul*, then I may join the Psalmist in proclaiming:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall pursue me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the House of the Lord forever.”

Starting now. Starting this Easter morning.