

Easter's Other Miracle

Luke 24:1-6a, 34-43 Very early in the morning on the first day of the week, the women went to the tomb, bringing the fragrant spices they had prepared. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they went in, they didn't find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ They didn't know what to make of this. Suddenly, two men were standing beside them in gleaming bright clothing. ⁵ The women were frightened and bowed their faces toward the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" ⁶ He isn't here, but has been raised.

³⁴ They were saying to each other, "The Lord really has risen! He appeared to Simon!" ³⁵ Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them as he broke the bread. ³⁶ While they were saying these things, Jesus himself stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" ³⁷ They were terrified and afraid. They thought they were seeing a ghost.

³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you startled? Why are doubts arising in your hearts?" ³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet. It's really me! Touch me and see, for a ghost doesn't have flesh and bones like you see I have." ⁴⁰ As he said this, he showed them his hands and feet. ⁴¹ Because they were wondering and questioning in the midst of their happiness, he said to them, "Do you have anything to eat?" ⁴² They gave him a piece of baked fish. ⁴³ Taking it, he ate it in front of them.

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It's probably safe to say that most of us – and most of the people we know – are pretty sure that we know the story of Christmas and the story of Easter. But that may not quite be true. If the story of Easter that you know is largely informed by one or more of the big movie productions that have been made over the years, you may have retained some misinformation that leaves you with an understanding that is incomplete at best, and quite possibly badly mistaken. Way back when, a few of us were deeply impressed by the movie *King of Kings*. Seeing Jesus portrayed by Jeffry Hunter as a blue-eyed man with light brown hair might have made it easy for us to relate to someone who looked a lot like us. But it kept us from understanding Jesus as a swarthy middle-eastern Semitic Jew.

Much more recently, *The Passion of the Christ* portrayed in brutal detail the torture that Jesus suffered. Since the film was done in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin, it left the impression that it was much like an accurate documentary, but the movie was filled with unscriptural traditions. Most importantly, the movie only showed a brutal death and ignored a glorious resurrection.

Last year I saw portions of a History Channel presentation that was humbly titled *The Bible*. I've had to just walk away from it in frustration several times. I realized that the topic is just too much to cover in even a long series on TV. Fine. But I resent the apparent need that was felt to "improve" the story with fabrications. I'm sorry, but where did they get the unmitigated gall to insert ninja warriors as angels into the story of Sodom and Gomorrah?

As we learned in the adult Sunday school class, each of the gospel writers tell the story of the crucifixion and the story of the resurrection in different ways. The stories are not entirely identical. So, if you have a favorite gospel, and that's where you always read the Easter story, then there would be significant things that you don't know about.

Still, most people would say that Easter is the story of a miracle, the miracle of God raising Jesus from the dead. In all of the excitement and wonder of Easter, we tend to forget that there are other instances of raising the dead in scripture. We can forget that Jesus called Lazarus from his tomb, raised the daughter of a Roman centurion back to life, and restored the life of a widow's son as the funeral procession was headed for the cemetery. (Luke 7:11-16) Both Peter (Acts 9:40) and

Paul (Acts 20:9-12) restored people to life as did the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 17:17-24) and his successor, Elisha (2 Kings 4:18-37 and 13:21). So this morning, let's give some thought to Easter's other miracle.

As I studied, I reviewed the accounts in all four gospels. In this overview, I was struck by a couple of things. First, the actions of the disciples were worse than sub-standard – they were deplorable. Mark tells us that on the way to Jerusalem. James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came and asked Jesus to put them in charge of the other disciples. (Mark 10:38-41) That takes a lot of nerve to ask your rabbi to set you in charge of his other students. But it gets even worse. Matthew says that James and John didn't do the asking – their mother did! They were there, but they got Momma to come with them and ask! That's pathetic! They want to be leaders, but they got Momma to ask for them? You know that isn't right! And the rest of the disciples were very angry over all of this. So, even though Jesus headed on to Jerusalem, there was dissention in the ranks.

We are disgusted by people who abandon their dog. We are revolted and angered by someone who abandons a child. Now think about this. On the night that Jesus was betrayed and arrested, as they ate supper together, all of the disciples vowed that they would never deny their Lord. (Matt 26:35) In Mark (14:27-31) all of the disciples vow that they will never desert Jesus. Yet only a few hours later, when Jesus was arrested, they all ran away. They broke their vow. They lied. They deserted their friend when he needed their comfort. They were unfaithful. They abandoned the man they had declared to be the messiah, God's anointed one. They turned their back on God. What reaction can possibly be sufficient for someone who had been a close associate but then abandons God's own chosen one? What reaction does that call for?

And then there was Peter. He ran away. Yes – but he returned to the courtyard outside the council chambers where Jesus was being accused of blasphemy. Jesus had told Peter that he would deny any association with him. Despite that very specific warning, despite knowing what to guard himself against, Peter denied Jesus publicly three times. He not only had failed to stand by Jesus, now he actively shunned him.

On the day of his resurrection, two followers heard rumors that Jesus was raised, but not believing it, and feeling that all was lost, they left Jerusalem and headed for Emmaus. One would expect Jesus to just let them go. If they didn't believe his own earlier statements about his death and resurrection, if they didn't believe the reports that he had risen from the other disciples, then why bother with them? Instead, Jesus walked along with them but they didn't recognize him. And as they walked along he explained again how death and resurrection had been anticipated. And then, over a meal in the village of Emmaus, they finally recognized him! Isn't it odd that he bothered with them at all – and even odder that he didn't berate them or condemn them for their lack of faith? Instead, he taught them until they finally understood.

That evening, Jesus appeared to the disciples who had deserted him in the Garden. He could be expected to punish those who deserted him at such a traumatic moment. As he hung in agony, he could be expected to be angry that they didn't even show up at the cross to offer love or comfort as he died. But the first words he spoke were "Peace be with you." And no anger or bitterness followed. Later, when Thomas refused to believe that the others had seen Jesus, he said, "I have to see the wounds to know it is really him and believe." So Jesus appeared to them again eight days later. Again, his greeting was "Peace be with you," Then he told Thomas, "Here I am. Look. Touch." If that was what Thomas needed, Jesus made himself available. There were no harsh words, no tongue lashing, no demand that Thomas beg for forgiveness before it would be given.

Even Peter who had cursed and declared that he never knew Jesus – even Peter wasn't rebuked and censored. "Do you love me Peter?" "Yes, Lord" "Then feed my sheep. Take care of the flock. Watch over them. Be a good shepherd."

Here is Easter's other miracle, the amazing miracle that we overlook. None of these people (who had acted so badly, who were so deserving of God's wrath, none of them) were punished in word or action. In none of these cases was anyone told to repent. No one had to beg to be forgiven for the terrible things they had done. They didn't get what they deserved. They got forgiven. They weren't smothered with retribution. They were surrounded with love. There is so much gospel in these stories; there is so much good news in these verses. This is miraculous. This is Easter's other miracle. "Love so amazing, so divine, demands [your] soul, [your] life, [your] all." Weep for joy, sisters and brothers! Weep for joy! Happy Easter!

Sisters and brothers,
Hear the good news!
He is risen!
Fear not!
He brings forgiveness undeserved,
encouragement unexpected,
and new life to celebrate with joy!