

HEARTS ON FIRE

By Steve Zeisler

There are two questions that are appropriate and inevitable today. They go back to the first Easter, and they have been asked every Easter since. First, did God really break the power of death and raise his Son to life in a miracle of extraordinary proportions, or is there some natural explanation for the empty tomb?

The second question is more personal: Assuming God did raise his Son to life, is it important to me? Does any claim on my life proceed from the account of Jesus' resurrection?

Let's consider the first question. Remember "doubting Thomas?" Despite the testimony of his fellow disciples he said, "I won't believe it until I have first-hand evidence myself." There was also a conspiracy of Jewish priests and Roman soldiers in the days after word of Jesus' resurrection began to spread. Matthew 28:11-15 records that they told the lie that Jesus' disciples had raided the tomb and stolen the body. There have been questions of the facts of the resurrection from the beginning.

Modern skeptics abound on every side. They're sort of like the foam that washes up on the beach--unavoidable, but not long-lasting. A new group of skeptical scholars, popping up every few years, claims that there was some sort of "Passover plot," or that the women went to the wrong tomb, or that the documents of the New Testament are unreliable history. These folks are always forgotten completely, only to be replaced by some new, slightly different version of skeptics in the next generation. But the question remains, was Jesus' resurrection a miracle or is there a natural way to understand the empty tomb?

The other question, as I said, has to do with relevance. Suppose the resurrection did happen--what claim does it make on me?

The Easter message is often diluted even for people who attend church and claim Christian faith. It becomes the story of chocolate bunnies, painted eggs, and Easter bonnets--a Christian vernal equinox celebration. It's springtime, and new life is budding, and as the earth renews itself, we renew ourselves. We're grateful for the ending of winter and the coming of spring. The resurrection is a sweet affirmation of life, not a great victory that makes a radical claim on our lives.

However, the insistence of the Bible is that not only are the facts as described, but everything hinges on the message of the resurrection. There is no greater claim that will ever be made for your allegiance, no greater source of hope, no more important foundation on which to center your life.

DOWNCAST ABOUT WHAT GOD DIDN'T DO

Let us consider a story in Luke's gospel in which two ordinary men were asking these questions: Is it true, and is it relevant? If you read the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the majority of the significant players in the resurrection accounts are people who are otherwise important in the New Testament. Mary Magdalene was an important figure in the church's early years, a saintly respondent to the gospel. More important were Peter and John. They became apostles, pillars of the church. But in Luke 24, Luke tells us of two very ordinary people. One of them is named Cleopas, and the other isn't even named. They never show up again in any of the New-Testament stories. They were not prominent in the life of the early church. They were just like us, two people with ordinary hearts and hopes. They came from a little town called Emmaus. Archeologists have never been able to find where Emmaus was, even though it was just seven miles from Jerusalem. This is a story that we can enter very easily. Let's read verses 13-24:

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?"

They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

"What things?" he asked.

"About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see."

One of the things that I think is wonderful about this account is how many of the facts these men got right. They told the events of Friday, Saturday, and Sunday with clarity and precision. But the end of verse 17 tells us that despite knowing the facts clearly, they stood still and their faces were downcast. They didn't know what to believe.

Now, we don't have any more or less information than they had. If any of us believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, we believe it because the women went to the tomb and found it empty, the angel interpreted the empty tomb for them, and the disciples (Peter and John and others) came and investigated and also saw the tomb empty. The men of Emmaus observe the tomb for themselves, they just heard the reports of those witnesses. We hear the same reports. And some among us may find ourselves in the same position: standing still with our face downcast. What are we to make of it all? Why do the accounts of the Bible inspire us to a kind of wistfulness on the one hand, but nothing really changes on the other? We talk to our friends and kind of hope it's true. But why isn't there more to it than that?

These two travelers were heading home from Jerusalem. They told a traveling stranger why they were deflated by all that had happened. They had hoped that Jesus the prophet, teacher, and inspired leader, a spokesman from God, would redeem Israel. But he couldn't survive the onslaught of his wicked enemies, and their hopes were dashed. They had hoped, in short, that Jesus would fix things--throw off the Roman yoke, put down the corrupt priests everywhere around them, and replace the legalistic religious establishment with people who loved God fervently. They had hoped that justice would prevail.

How many of us have ended up wistful, standing still with our face downcast, because we had hoped God would do things he didn't do? How many of us have hoped that God would throw out the wicked from high places, clean up the sordid entertainment industry that spews out degrading works on every side, put just and righteous people in positions of power in the government, and deal with the sadness of the poor and the outcast?

How many of us have hoped God would fix things in our own life? Why doesn't he get me out of my dead-end job? Why doesn't he take away family tensions? I'm reading the Bible, I have friends who are Christians, and we walk along on the road together and discuss things. Yet I don't get along with my kids, and my spouse doesn't understand me. I was hoping that I would find myself in a new social environment, filled with charming and attractive people who continually affirm me, instead of going to church with folks a lot like me. Why doesn't God change the circumstances I'm in?

That was the problem of these two travelers--the prophet had died and he hadn't fixed things. They had heard the testimony describing an empty tomb, but they didn't yet believe it was true, and they weren't compelled to believe it was important.

THE LOVE BEHIND THE FACTS

Let's read on in verses 25-32:

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it and began to give it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Look carefully at the timing. Even before they knew this companion was Jesus, the hearts of Cleopas and his friend had been set on fire. Their lives had changed. They realized that the witness of Moses and all the prophets, the story of Scripture from the

beginning, foretold the wonderful events of Good Friday and Easter. It had to be true and it had to be important.

Verses 33-35:

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, "It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon." Then the two told what had happened on the way, and how Jesus was recognized by them when he broke the bread.

It had taken them until late in the day to walk the seven miles to Emmaus. But they were so excited when they realized not only who had spoken to them, but the phenomenal importance of what he had said, that they got up and ran the seven miles back to Jerusalem that evening. They couldn't contain themselves. They had to tell somebody what had happened.

Before we look in detail at what Jesus said to them, note that they could not change their own hearts when they had the facts but no faith. It didn't help to know that the tomb was empty. What they needed was to understand the purpose of God, the love that was behind the story, the living God behind the accounts of the facts. The only way for that to happen was for God to do something. And he did.

That may very well be happening to you. You may find yourself hearing things from an ordinary-sounding voice, but you're hearing things about God's love, his faithfulness, and his purpose that make sense in a new way. The events are told in a way that penetrates the heart so that you know not only that it's true, but that it's important and life-changing. That's what God does. He helps you grasp what you already knew.

These are the points Jesus must have made, among others: The One sent from God had to die. It was critical that he die. The world did not go out of control. His enemies did what God intended they do. He had never come to fix the circumstances. He came to change us.

In recent weeks in this church we've been studying the opening chapters of Genesis. We're looking at the story of Noah, an ancient effort to fix things. In the flood God destroyed every pocket of wickedness, every sordid community, every concentration of what was evil. And it didn't work. Within a generation everything had gone wrong again.

There is no fixing things from the outside, only from the inside. And so the One who had come from heaven had to die so that none of us would ever find a barrier of sins between us and God. You are forgiven. I am forgiven. It will last forever. We never again need to wonder if God will hear our prayers. We are now the proper residence of the Holy Spirit. We have a new identity, a new way of understanding who we are. We are children of God, new creatures in Christ. We have the power of God available to us by his Spirit to live different lives.

It says that the One who came from God will enter glory. That means the end of the story is a good end. Death has died and life has won. The war is over, and we are on the winning side.

I was at a conference recently where I heard a story I want to tell you. It set my heart on fire. It is the true account of a young virtuoso pianist in England. At the end of his first concert the audience leaped to their feet and cheered wildly. The young man walked off the stage, and the concert manager said, "It's a standing ovation! Go back out and play an encore."

"No, I can't," he said.

The manager replied, "Listen to the crowd--they love you! They want to hear you again."

He said, "Not everybody is standing. There's one man in the balcony who has remained seated."

The concert manager rolled his eyes. "What do you mean, one man? So what?"

The pianist said, "That man is my teacher."

I thought that was a good story, one that started me thinking about important people in my life whose approval or disapproval carry great weight. Then, a wonderful link to the New Testament was added to the story of the young pianist. Stephen preached a remarkable sermon recorded in Acts 7. His hearers were violently antagonistic--indeed, they killed him for his faith. At the end of his message, all by himself, standing for the Lord, he told the crowd, 'Look, I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God' [Acts 7:56]. Every other time in the Bible when it speaks of Jesus at the right hand of God, it says he's seated. This was the standing ovation from the teacher whose approval Stephen wanted more than anything else.

Does Jesus love me that much? Is that the kind of love and approval I have in relationship with him? Knowing these truths sets a

heart on fire.

I hope that's your experience. Is your heart burning inside you? If so, it means it was Jesus who spoke to you, even though you didn't know it was him. Nothing else is as important. And if it's true for you for the first time, this is the day you were born into God's kingdom. This is the day when a new reality will be yours that will last forever.

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Single Message
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