The Hiddenness of Our Easter Life

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

www.knollwood.org

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Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10

Many years ago, one of Knollwood's own, Bettye Briggs, was teaching in North Haven, Connecticut, while her husband pursued a degree at nearby Yale Divinity School. This was a predominantly Jewish and Catholic area, so much so that the local priest and rabbi paid Bettye a visit. They wanted to make sure she, a Baptist from the south, didn't indoctrinate their children in any strange Baptist ways.

The rabbi instructed her to read only from the Old Testament. And the priest instructed her that Catholic children had catechism at the end of each school day so they didn't need her teaching them the Bible. So Bettye did her best to stay out of trouble and honored both Jewish and Christian holidays, when they came around.

That year, as Easter drew near, Bettye decided to let the children tell her the Easter story. She began by asking, "Where was Jesus after he died on the cross?" Several hands shot up.

"Yes, Margaret?"

"He was in a cave with a big rock in front of the door!"

"And what happened on Easter morning?" . . . "*David?*"

"Some women came to take care of his body!”

"And what did they find?” a question that prompted more excited hand-waving . . . "*Tony?*”

"They saw the stone had been rolled away!"

"Then what did they do?" . . . "*Clara?*”

Breathlessly, Clara answered, "Then they looked inside.”

"Yes, and when they looked inside, what did they see?" . . . "*Jack?*”

Whereupon Jack, almost falling out of his seat with excitement, cried out, "And there was God, diggin' him out!”

Jack and Matthew, the writer of the first gospel, have something in common: They both favor the Stephen Spielberg version of Easter, the one full of pyrotechnics and special effects. In the other gospels, the story of Easter morning is a bit more muted and mysterious. The women arrive to discover to their dismay an empty tomb. They are worried and fretful until a young man in a white robe--or an angel, depending on which gospel you read--tells them what has happened: “He is not here; he is risen!” And pretty soon the women or someone else is bumping into a radiant, risen Jesus, full of life.

Only Matthew’s gospel pulls back the curtain so we see the actual moment when the stone is rolled away. The ground shudders beneath the women’s feet as an earthquake rolls by. Then the angel of the Lord descends with a theatrical flourish, his appearance like lightning, Matthew tells us, and his clothing white as snow.

The angel rolls back the stone, a millstone-like rock about the size of one of those round eight-foot tables in our Fellowship Hall. Pilate’s guards, stationed there to keep something just like this from happening, fall down as “dead men.” But it turns out they are the only dead men in those parts because Jesus has flown the coop. His tomb is empty and he is headed to Galilee

to meet his disciples. Whereupon the women are commissioned as the first evangelists of the great, glad news of Easter.

Yep, as Matthew tells the tale, it's pretty close to little Jack's version from a half-century ago in North Haven, Connecticut: the women arrived at the tomb . . . "And there was God, digging him out!"

But for most of us, our childhood imagining of Easter is long gone. And we've never been anywhere near a miracle of biblical proportions, especially one the size of the Easter miracle Matthew describes. No, twenty centuries removed from the first Easter, all we have is the witness of the four gospels that on Easter morning, Jesus' tomb was empty, in defiance of every rational expectation.

And yet for us, as for countless believers throughout time and eternity, it is still possible to know Jesus in an intimate, personal way. To be sure, not exactly like those first courageous women, who stared down guards sent to intimidate them... Until an earthquake shook loose the truth and an angel showered them in Easter light. But we too can know Jesus in a vital, life-changing way as Jesus asks doubting Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

That would be us: We are those who have not seen, at least not in the way that Matthew and Thomas and Mary did. But while our Easter faith is different, it need not be any less real.

Leslie Weatherhead delighted in the story of the aged Scot, drawing near death, when the family's minister was called. As the clergyman entered the room, he noticed an empty chair near the bed. "Well, Donald," said the pastor, "I see I'm not your first visitor today."

The old man looked puzzled until the minister nodded in the direction of the chair. "Oh *that,"* Donald answered. "Well, pastor, let me tell you about that chair."

"Many years ago I was finding it difficult to pray, so I shared this problem with my minister. He told me not to worry so much about how to pray, what technique to use, or whether

I should kneel or strike some other pious posture. Instead, he suggested I just sit down, pull up a chair opposite me, and imagine Jesus sitting in that chair. Then I should talk with Jesus as I would any other friend.

"And that," said the Scotsman, "is what I've been doing ever since."

Several days later, the daughter of the old gentleman called the pastor. She was quite shaken, as her father had just died, without giving any indication death was imminent. "I had just gone to lie down for an hour or two," she said, "because he seemed to be resting so comfortably. But when I came back, he was gone."

"It was the strangest thing," she continued. "He was just as I left him, except that now his hand was laying on that chair he always kept at his bedside."

"It's not so strange," the minister answered. "I understand."

For centuries, Jesus has been the unseen friend of countless souls who entrusted their all to him. He has calmed their fears in the face of every challenge, even when staring into the gaping jaws of death. And in good times and bad, he has led them ever deeper into the grace and goodness of God.

Paul the apostle is Exhibit A of that kind of vital, Easter faith. "For me to live is Christ," he cries, "and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21), and that from one who never saw Jesus in the flesh. But through an ever deepening communion with and obedience to the risen Lord, Jesus became as real to Paul as any who first stumbled upon the empty tomb.

"So if you have been raised with Christ," Paul chides the Colossians, "live like it!" Because discipleship is among other things, a choice. We don't inherit a living faith in Christ from our parents. And we don't magically imbibe it at Easter. No, we have to--in Paul's words--"Set (our) minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." Which has nothing to do with an other-worldly escapism, but seeing and living your life right here, right now, in the bright, illuminating light of Easter.

That's what Davis did this morning when he plunged beneath the waters of baptism. He said "goodbye" to a life without Christ and "Yes, Yes! YES!!" to a new life with Christ at the center. Believer's baptism offers both a vivid picture and a formative experience of being washed fresh and new in the welcoming grace of God. It also points to dying with Christ by nailing your sins to his cross and asking that you never have to face any challenge or claim any opportunity without his life rising within you like the dawn, warming your skin and awakening your heart.

Granted, we walk by faith and not by sight. Or as Paul says it here, "Our life is *hidden* with Christ in God." I like that word "hidden." It signals a certain modesty and reserve in the life of faith. To say that "our life is hidden with Christ in God" means that some of our hardest questions don't get answered and some of our festering wounds, never fully heal. But we hold on in hope and longing, regardless, like those gutsy women who lived through a long, dark Saturday to show up at that tomb on Easter morning.

And interestingly, in Matthew's Gospel, the women don't show up with spices in hand to perform their errand of mercy. Instead, Matthew reports simply that they come to *see* the tomb (Mt. 25:1, 6). And maybe to *see* what God will do next because the senseless, tragic death of Jesus simply cannot be the end.

In 1927, the wife of the renowned preacher, Arthur Gossip, suddenly died. In the aftermath of his crushing loss, Pastor Gossip preached a very personal sermon called, "When Life Tumbles In, What Then?"

In that sermon, he drew on the image of an airplane flying overhead during wartime. There you are, watching the plane gracefully make its way across a crisp blue sky when suddenly, it is blown apart and tumbles to earth. Only in Gossip's experience, what came tumbling down was the life of his beloved wife.

Gossip admitted he didn't understand a lot about life. But what he *did* discover in his own darkest hour of ache and need was that he needed his faith, now more than ever. "You people in the sunshine *may* believe the faith," he declared. "But we in the shadow *must* believe it. We have nothing else."

Yes, our life is *hidden* in Christ with God. Sometimes we are bewildered and broken by a shocking turn of events. Maybe with Jesus, we feel compelled to cry from our cross, "My God, my God, *Why?!"*

But we dare to believe that for us, as for him, this is not the end of the story. No, our loving, able God, in grace and longing, is plotting an Easter rising for us too.

The writer E. B. White wrote a moving poem about watching his aged wife, Katherine, as she planted bulbs in her garden. It was the autumn of the year and, as it turned out, the autumn of Katherine's own life. And yet she persisted in planting seeds of hope.

"There was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance," White wrote, "the small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in dying October, calmly plotting the resurrection."

Like the good earth, holding and hiding and hallowing the miracle of spring, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." So no, we don't get to see the risen Jesus, in the same way as did those newly christened believers by the empty tomb.

But in our own place and time, we can know and love him too: By striving to see ourselves and our world in his Easter light, and planting seeds of faithfulness and hope in the confidence that in God's good time, they will sprout new life. And so shall we.

"For when Christ--who is your life--is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him" in a "glory" even greater than the spring.

Thank God, as both the angel and the women proclaimed, “He is not here! He is risen!” Because that means Jesus yet lives . . . so you can find and follow him too.

Our loving Abba, the scriptures promise that when Christ is fully revealed, we shall be made like him for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2a).

Now in the meantime, help us cling to him in faithfulness and love, for in so doing, we are plotting our resurrection too. In the name of the Crucified and Risen One, we ask it. Amen.

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