

# Embracing Easter

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I love Easter and preaching on Easter.<sup>1</sup> There's a big challenge in that we've heard the story before and it can be hard not to be passé with it. But with the challenge there is the reality that we are, with the resurrection, and that's what Easter is about, dealing with the bare, raw, nuclear essence of the Christian faith. Nobody with any knowledge of Christianity disputes that. And with that assertion, there is the swish and flash and clang of Christian thought against everything that wants Easter to be about bunnies and bonnets, springtime cycles and butterflies and "higher truths."

Here's the background to what we are going to read in the Bible today. Jesus presented himself as the ultimate king of Israel (that's what Messiah means), whom he and other Jews would have panned out to be the final and ultimate king of the whole world. He orchestrated an arrival into the epicenter of Judaism, Jerusalem, having raised an enthusiastic crowd with many miracles, most recently the raising of a local businessman named Lazarus from the dead. Jesus and his supporters are a wave that crashes against the establishment and its inner workings and relationship with Rome. It's a crown him or kill him week and with Jesus not doing a strong arm overthrow, he's only crowned in mocking as he is killed. Yet this is exactly what he predicted, and with it, also his resurrection. Many Jews did not believe in a resurrection and all who did

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<sup>1</sup> I'm going to preach and, as is typical on an Easter Sunday, give you reasons to have confidence the resurrection happened. I will say that it seems to me to be fair, somehow/sometime we need to have the other side log in and make their case for why it didn't happen. My guess is that many are just not sure either way and say that being unsure is ok. We don't do that when we go to the airport about which gate we leave from. Because it matters we figure it out. Let's take a step towards figuring things out today.

thought it was something at the end of time.<sup>2</sup> Nobody thought anything different. The Messiah doesn't die. Jesus dies. Therefore, he's not the Messiah. There is no thought of resurrection. The movement is over. Over.

We read. John 20:1-20

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson decide to go on a camping trip. After dinner they lay down for the night, and go to sleep. Some hours later, Holmes awoke and nudged his faithful friend. "Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see."

Watson replied, "I see millions of stars."

"What does that tell you?"

Watson pondered for a minute. "Astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets. Astrologically, I observe that Saturn is in Leo. Horologically, I deduce that the time is approximately a quarter past three. Theologically, I can see that God is all powerful and that we are small and insignificant. Meteorologically, I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What does it tell you, Holmes?"

Holmes was silent for a minute, then spoke: "Watson, you dummy. Someone has stolen our tent!"

I don't want to go too astronomical or horological or meteorological or even theological today. Let's be real "the-tent-is-gone basic" and talk about, as you'd expect, why we can and should embrace the resurrection.

Christianity may appear to be, but is not, a silo of moral teaching related to Jesus. It is news (and the implications of that news). It is not what someone should do, but what has happened. If a general is coming against your city to sack it, a military advisor will say you should do this and do that, ramparts here and archers there. But if that general is defeated outside the city, a military messenger tells what happened.

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<sup>2</sup> Remember Mary saying to Jesus, "I know Lazarus will rise at the last day"?

What has happened in this instance is that Jesus had fatal injuries, total body system failure, was a medical-examiner-certified corpse, unquestionably and irreversibly dead and then had his heart start beating again,<sup>3</sup> brain function return, lungs expand, blood flow, and he became fully alive again, and alive in the eating and bodily fluids sense of alive, and was, while scarred, better than well in terms of health. So when we talk about why we can embrace the resurrection, we're not talking about our embracing a concept, but rather our embracing that an actual, historical resurrection from the dead occurred. Let me say to you, "Embrace the resurrection. It is unbelievably reasonable and, strangely enough, is starkly uncomfortable. These commend the resurrection to us."

**Unbelievably reasonable.** You know some really bright people have confidence in the fact of Jesus' resurrection. True, there are bright people who don't. But that there are those who do and that they do it with intelligence means that one can embrace the resurrection with intellectual integrity. Just as I was preparing this week, I read the convinced-of-the-actuality-of-the-resurrection remarks of three Pulitzer Prize winning writers<sup>4</sup> and a USC philosophy professor.

The reasonableness of Christ's resurrection has lots of ins and outs. I have one book alone, just on the resurrection, that is 740 pages. And I have several more. It'd be impossible to go through a fraction of them now (though I wish we could!).

One of those smart people, one of the Pulitzer Prize winners who has confidence the resurrection "unmetaphorically" happened, is Garry Wills. He won the Pulitzer for *Lincoln at Gettysburg*. He also wrote *What Jesus Meant*. In that second book

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<sup>3</sup> See Mary Karr's poem *Descending Theology*. Here's one line: In the corpse's core, the stone fist / of his heart began to bang / on the stiff chest's door.

<sup>4</sup> Annie Dillard, John Updike, and Garry Wills. The philosopher is Dallas Willard.

he says three things are persuasive to him as a historian. Are you curious what they are? I was. So amid everything that could be said, let's look at his three.<sup>5</sup>

One, the empty tomb. Every great movement has enshrined its founder or leaders. When I was in graduate school I went to Moscow and there in Red Square is the tomb of Lenin, a leader in communism. That's what people do and that's what was standardly done. Not the Christians however. They broke with tradition. No tomb. Why? Because Jesus was alive.<sup>6</sup> And if you have seen one empty tomb, you've seen them all.

Tourist busses in Israel will take you to where a guess is of where Jesus' temporary tomb was. I've been on those busses. But the truth is, it was lost and in pretty short order. A mother helped me understand this. When your kid is gone to college or if he has died, you kind of hold on to his bedroom and pause nostalgically at the door. When they're growing up and living there, you don't pause outside the door. You just pass by and wonder why they don't keep it cleaned up. The Christians didn't note his tomb because he wasn't gone; he was with them.

Two, Garry Wills speaks of the quality of the resurrection reports and understated encounters of Jesus with people. It doesn't read stylistically like legend.<sup>7</sup> (And it's written entirely too

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<sup>5</sup> He's going to use eyewitness accounts collected into the NT and before we go to his points, let me ask you this – What caused the eyewitness accounts in the first place? What caused the NT in the first place? We think the NT explains the resurrection but actually the resurrection explains the NT.

<sup>6</sup> I'll complicate the argument to point out that in the case of Messiahs, and there were a few that claimed to be, once they were dead, that by definition meant they weren't the overthrowing and ruling king. So everyone would go home. The tomb is the tomb and every supporter goes home and forgets a failure.

<sup>7</sup> Since it is commonly thought that the NT is probably at least somewhat legend, I wish I could talk about how the NT writing is too soon after the events to even possibly be legend and how the style is completely

early for that to even be a possibility, by the way.) It is chaotic and rough and personal. There are flawed people, not heroes to bolster a movement. There is misunderstanding. There are women and no one in the ancient world found women credible. One writer in the second century, Celsus, found it laughable that the NT had women witnesses<sup>8</sup> and discredited Christianity accordingly. So why have the women there at all unless they were actually there? The characters in the account are startled and not expecting a resurrection. There are different viewpoints. The writings put together are not exactly the same or seamless. There's no fanfare. In other words, it simply smacks of being real. (Read them for yourselves and see.)

We know how this works. Sometimes my kids will say how something went down, how something happened. "He just walked in and hit me." And I say, "That sounds fishy." Why would I say that? Because I'm thinking that's not how normal things typically take place. So I say, "Come on, tell the truth." Turns out when the one walked in, the other called him a name. That's why he hit him. Now that makes sense. Gary Wills is saying that as a professional historian, used to investigating the past, the eyewitness accounts sound like truth.

Three, Garry Wills notes the "seismic" (that's his word) change in the disciples. Scared fishermen became strong spokespersons. Those who deserted become ready to die. Within weeks those who hid behind walls said, not to humanity in general but to Jerusalem residents right in the face, "You ... You killed him. God raised him. We saw him. Say you're sorry."<sup>9</sup> Something changed them.

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different than that of legends. See, for example, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* by Richard Bauckham.

<sup>8</sup> And if Celsus had known that the first and main woman witness was not just a woman but a reformed demon-possessed woman!

<sup>9</sup> Now, if they didn't stand with him when he was alive and making stupendous claims for himself, why, if they knew he was dead and

A young executive was leaving the office late one night when he saw the CEO standing in front of the shredder with a piece of paper in his hand. The CEO said, "This is a very sensitive document and my secretary is gone. Can you make this thing work for me?" The young man said, "Certainly." He turned the machine on and inserted the paper. "Excellent, excellent!" said the CEO as the paper disappeared into the machine. "I just need one copy...."

Something changed that CEO and young executive's mood and you and I know what it was. That's what Garry Wills is saying. There's a change, a big one, and something caused it.

Here's Shusaku Endo, a Japanese philosopher. Garry Wills doesn't reference him but Endo says what Wills is saying. "If you don't believe in the resurrection, you will be forced to believe that something hit the disciples that was every bit amazing, maybe different, yet of equal force in electrifying intensity. For if you try to explain the changed lives of the early Christians, you will find yourself making leaps of faith every bit as great as if we believed in the resurrection to start with."

**Starkly uncomfortable.** Sometimes people say, "I don't like what the Bible says about money or turning the other cheek or sex or marriage."<sup>10</sup> Ok, but what does that have to do with whether the resurrection happened or not? It either did or it didn't. Some think it did and it didn't. Or some think it didn't and it did. But it either did or didn't. (If someone says, "Well, it did metaphorically," that means it didn't literally. It either did or didn't.)

Liking or disliking is neither here nor there. Nor is *wanting* to believe. I had a date when I was in college. We were going to a dinner playhouse outside Bethesda, MD. I believed we had gas.

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therefore his messianic claims were proved untrue, would they stand up for him?

<sup>10</sup> Or, "I don't believe it because I don't like certain Christians." Or "the institution called the church."

We didn't. My belief got rearranged around the facts. That is, we were all dressed up and stranded on the road.

Paul didn't want to believe in the resurrection. It made a mess of all his training, of his temple, of his religion, of his priesthood, of his sacrifices, of his Jerusalem, of his theology, ... and then he met Jesus and it didn't matter whether he wanted to believe in the resurrection and in Jesus, it happened and Jesus was there. So he put on his big boy pants and dealt with it.

Maybe you don't like things the church has done. I don't either. Maybe you don't like some things in the Bible. I don't either. Maybe you don't want to believe in Jesus. Ok. But what really matters is, "Did he actually rise from the dead?" Believing you have gas in your car when you don't, doesn't change the facts. Not liking gas matters not. Facts are facts and in the end you'll get stranded if your belief doesn't fit the facts. Did Jesus in fact rise from the dead? The NT doesn't back down. Like a bull in a china shop, "Yes, it did."<sup>11</sup>

**Conclusion.** There's a little detail in the passage. I wonder if you noticed it? We're told in the passage that the disciple John looked into the tomb from outside and the word there for "look" means observe. Then he stepped inside and saw and there the word for "saw" means perceived. He didn't just simply decide. He had to think and make sense of what he was seeing. He'd have been processing something like this -- "Grave robbers wouldn't leave the valuable spices and they'd be in such a hurry that they wouldn't take off the grave clothes. Other disciples in our band? No, they're too frightened to do this and if they weren't, why carry him away naked? Rotting bodies and Jewish people, doesn't fit. Religious and political authorities precisely did not want this to happen so they wouldn't have done it. What's the answer?"

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<sup>11</sup> A whole rethinking, "go back to square one," happened including for Judaism as a monotheistic faith. God as a man such that he's worshipped?? Never! And yet they did.

What's the answer? It makes sense, however, if it's as he said – that he would rise from the dead.”

That what John did. That's what Paul did. That's what Garry Wills did too. And it is what all of us must do. You may be outside looking in and you may just be observing. But now step in, process. Think. We won't get everything figured out by any means. But there's ample evidence. Look at it. Process it. Perceive. Step in. Believe. Look. Process. Perceive. Step in. And as you make that step, you experience a seismic tremor and it won't be for just your world. It'll be for the whole world. .

*Lord, Guide our observing and bring us to perceiving. You who are listening to this prayer, will you say it yourself? Will you say right now, “God, help me see, perceive, and believe”?*

I can't give you an exact date or place but I can tell you it was as sharp as crystal and condensed into a clear moment. I can still in this moment right now visualize the realization that the gap in front of me requiring a leap of faith had become smaller requiring only a step of faith. Then I looked over my shoulder and there was an even bigger gap behind me over which I would have to take the biggest leap of faith *to disbelieve*. My prayer for all of us is that we can take a step *to believe*.

*If you would like to talk with someone about this message or your spiritual life, or to have someone pray with you, the pastors and elders of the church would welcome your call.*

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