

What If It's True?

Isaiah 65:17-25; 1 Cor 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12
Easter 2022 by Zac Koons for St. Mark's, Austin

What a beautiful day. What a beautiful day!

However.

If I'm honest, this year it's a beautiful day with a somewhat unsettling shadow. Easter Sunday this year feels a bit like the parade you throw for soldiers when they come home from war. There's lots of pomp and circumstance; trumpets, donuts, and polite conversation; there is, of course, genuine reason to celebrate—our Lenten fasts are over, the war with Covid has largely been won, our lives are returning to normal. Yet, all the while there is in the background a never-fully-extinguished awareness of this war's costs—of those we lost along the way, of our own accumulated wounds, in body and in mind, some of them as obvious to others as a missing limb but many more well-hidden in our hearts. And even if we wanted to share, to interrupt all the talk of triumph and victory; to stop the parade and say “Hey, I'm actually not happy; I'm actually in pain” doesn't feel like it's allowed.

This, it seems to me, is the implicit deal American society has struck with its actual soldiers who go to war on their behalf: We will celebrate you, we will put you first in line at the airport, we will give you discounts on everything you can imagine, and in return all we ask of you is that you keep your pain to yourself, keep the horrible memories of war to yourself, just let our trumpets of victory cover over everything and let's leave it at that. It feels to me that Easter Sunday, especially this year, runs the danger of communicating the same thing.

Because the truth is, we have been through hell. In these 2+ years we have seen friendships become distant, marriages dissolve; children fall behind; addiction and depression flare up. We are lonely and somehow still over-busy; fragile yet still trying to keep up appearances. And now, in a moment that's supposed to feel like hope, as we swim desperately to the surface after almost drowning in the pandemic, we emerge to a world inching ever closer to world war, to record-breaking inflation, to never ending warnings of climate apocalypse; we have emerged to bigger and bigger problems we feel increasingly unable to do almost anything about and so I wouldn't blame you if the trumpets sound a little hollow.

The Easter story is full of people in profound pain. Some of it we know. Much more of it, we can assume, never made it to print. We know Mary Magdalene had been possessed by seven demons. Thomas suffered from perennial anxiety and doubt. Peter with anger and a fickle heart. All the disciples were poor. Not a single one of them, from what we can tell, were any good at marriage. They'd all left entire lives behind, and we like to think that Jesus must have been just that compelling but our worldly wisdom knows that most of the people who drop everything to start a new life probably didn't have that great of a life to begin with. Those who followed Jesus were as broken, wounded, and confused as you and me.

But eventually, each of them, regardless of whatever reason they first decided to follow him, each in their own time came to believe that this Jesus of Nazareth was the real deal. They weren't sure exactly what that meant and he said lots of things they didn't fully understand but they knew when they were around him they felt

genuine hope. It's not that Jesus cured their sadness but that he gave them joy to go alongside it. It's not that the world ceased to be difficult around Jesus—they were constantly in trouble with the law, they rarely slept in the same place two nights in a row—but the more time they spent with him the more the difficult world revealed itself to be simultaneously more and more beautiful.

And most importantly, Jesus loved them. In knowing Jesus they came to know themselves as objects worthy of love. It was a love that called out the very best in them. There was just this presence about him, this pulsating affection that infected his every word and every action that seemed to bubble up from somewhere so deep inside him it felt like he was in touch with the very fabric of the universe.

And then, just as they were beginning to grasp the wonders of this relationship, just as their old lives filled with scandal or crime or debt or abuse or depression or loneliness seemed to be disappearing over the horizon of the past, this Jesus was taken away from them too, and with him that transforming love, that peculiar joy, that undeniable beauty, and that impenetrable hope.

This is rock bottom. For the disciples, who are hiding, in shock and ashamed, behind in a locked room. For three women too—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James—walking to visit a rock that covered the grave of the man on which they had hung all their hope. Overwhelmed by their inability to do anything practical to fix their situation, the women opt to do something beautiful instead—to go anoint the body of their beloved, where they found the strangest thing: the rock at the bottom of the universe had been rolled aside.

Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. Then they remembered his words.

I imagine there's a good long pause between when the angels stop speaking and when the women "remembered Jesus' words." And I imagine that long pause being mostly filled with thoughts like: *No way. No. No. No. No. No. That would be too good to be true. It's not true. How dare you, actually. I'm in a very fragile state. Don't blow your trumpets at me can't you see I'm in pain. Stop trying to celebrate. That can't be true.* But then, at some point, that pause gave way to another thought: *What if it is true?*

Well if it is, they need to tell somebody. They need to tell everybody. They run to the disciples. "But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them." Not believing women is not a new historical phenomenon, it turns out. I imagine another long and similar silence at this point. But then the text says, "But Peter got up and ran to the tomb." Meaning, the same thought eventually came to Peter. *What if it's true?*

What if it's true? Well, If it's true, then there's reason to hope for the future again. If it's true, the world is enchanted with beauty again. If it's true, joy can fill our hearts again even in difficult circumstances. If it's true, more important than anything else, we get that love back; that pure, transforming love that we thought we had lost forever; we didn't lose it after all; we get to be loved by that love again.

But there's more. *Then they remembered all Jesus' words.* All of the sudden, all the thousand things Jesus had said that they didn't understand at the time come flooding back. Not loud like trumpets. More like a still, small

voice whispering in your ear from the depths of the universe. Like a silent realization that infects your entire existence. Kind of like, when you get to the very end of a mystery novel, when the final puzzle piece falls into place and you finally know who did it, you have to frantically start the book over again to see how you possibly missed something that's been right in front of you all along.

Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. If that's true, well, what else is true? What about all that stuff about being God's only Son. That if you know me you know the Father. Is it possible that Jesus was not only my friend but is also God? Wait a second, am I loved by God? Could that be true?

And what about all that stuff about sins being forgiven. About never failing grace. Is it possible that the mistakes I have made in the past won't actually follow me around forever? Wait, what about all that talk of Christ being only the first fruits of those raised from the dead. Of all being made alive in Christ. Is God going to raise us from the dead too? And what about all that talk of everlasting life. Is it possible that I don't actually have to be afraid of the future? That the future is bigger than the past? What if death is not the end, but death is instead just a doorway to everlasting life? What if it's true?

There's even more. If it's true, then this is about more than just you. If Jesus died not just for our sins but for the sins of the whole world. If Jesus is not just human but is also God who was present at the creation of the world, then this has consequences for everyone. For the whole world. For all history. If it's true that the God who created the world in the first place also determines how it ends, then one day there really *will be a new heavens and a new earth, [a day] where the former things will not be remembered, a New Jerusalem in which there will no more be sounds of weeping or distress, where infants will no longer live but a few days, where the old get to live life to the fullest, where labor shall not be in vain, where fruit bursts forth from every vine, where the wolf and lamb feed together, and peace and harmony will reign forever.* Is it possible that everything that's ever been sad is one day going to come untrue? Is it possible that this has been the plan all along?

What if it's true? Well, if it's not, then we of all people are most to be pitied. But if it is, if it is, well at the very least, that's cause for a parade like the world has never seen. Not a parade of polite society where loss and wounds are covered over and ignored; where trumpets cover over everything with disingenuous pronouncements of triumph from on high. But a parade of broken, beautiful, joyful people, where trumpets on high are met with joy that bubbles up from the depths of every single person's soul. A celebration not of being perfect but of being forgiven. A day that doesn't ignore the tragedy of death but celebrates that it is not the end. A parade of peace, hope, and love. A resurrection parade.

If it's true, we can't keep this parade to ourselves. It's cause for people from all over the world to gather together and sing and shout and eat and bless and rejoice. Imagine the wonder of it: people in every city and village in every country in the world on the same day celebrating the same thing: that it might be true. And if it is, this is only the beginning. For this parade never ends. And it never stops getting better. It never stops getting more beautiful. Easter lasts forever.

Amen.