

Conrad Hyers has written a book called, The Bible as Divine Comedy. In it he points out that the early Greek orthodox tradition developed the custom that on Easter Sunday morning church members, led by their bishops would gather before the service to tell tall tales and swap good jokes and split the temple curtain with peals of laughter. Rather unreformed, isn't it – but they did it to celebrate and enjoy the big Easter Joke, the ultimate reversal of fortunes, the surprising grand finale that, like a left hook sent an apparent human tragedy of Black Friday reeling into the divine comedy of Easter Sunday.

You are looking for who?

He's not here - he's back in Galilee and all of heaven burst out in laughter.

It is finished - not! And all of heaven peals with the reverberation of divine laughter

In keeping with the tradition, I offer the following:

Atheist and God – get your own dirt

Little girl wants to know where humans came from...

A burglar broke into a home and was looking around. He heard a soft voice say, "Jesus is watching you". Thinking it was just his imagination, he continued his search. Again the voice said "Jesus is watching you". He turned his flashlight around and saw a parrot in a cage. He asked the parrot if he was the one talking and the parrot said, "yes." He asked the parrot what his name was and the parrot said, "Moses." The burglar asked, "what kind of people would name a parrot Moses?" The parrot said, "the same kind of people who would name their German Shepherd Jesus".

Read scripture

He is not here. He has risen.

The grave is empty won't you come and see.

It seems to me that these might be the most challenging words in the whole scripture. Its one thing to read these words or recite them in familiar creeds, but to believe this – that Jesus Christ, crucified, dead and buried, has been raised from the dead? That takes a thoroughly redeemed imagination!

Good Friday is not that hard; sad, but also kind of easy, natural even. We recognize the violence of empires and the death of an innocent man at the hands of threatened authorities sounds like something we can read in the news. We can relate to that. We can also relate to the nobility of paying the ultimate sacrifice, giving up one's life for love – some of the best novels turn on similar themes. We can relate.

The whole season of lent is devotionally easier, especially this year where our series kept us lingering at the cross where we listened to the pathos of our Lord's dying words. We can relate, we can identify because we ourselves are all too familiar with the steadfast cadences of suffering. It is the way of the world.

But resurrection? Can you believe it?

Two days ago at the annual outdoor way of the cross, as we walked through the streets of the inner city, and later on here at our service we sang "Were you there?" the old spiritual that causes me to tremble..." and I did feel something of a tremble, as we considered the unhoused, the hungry, the inequality. And I imagined the grief that African American slave women would bring to their singing of this mournful dirge and as later that evening Annie removed the Christ candle and we sang the Light is Gone... then I thought if you think this death makes you tremble wait until Sunday morning when the tomb is empty and the angel rolls away that redundant stone and says he's not here go look in Galilee, or when he taps you on the shoulder and says Good morning Mary, or passes through the door and says how about some breakfast Peter, and holds out his hands and says, "check it out Thomas". Talk about trembling. In Matthew's gospel we read that Jesus resurrection was accompanied by an earthquake – earth itself trembling, quaking at the awesome news that he who was crucified, dead and buried, has been raised up. Who can believe it?

If the story of Christ rising up out of his tomb does not make you tremble then I suppose we have not read it well enough, or we have heard it so often that the extraordinary has become ordinary or that the most unbelievable news has become, not believable as such, but somehow uninteresting.

As I said, these words are the most challenging in scripture

Nothing in our experience can prepare us for or give us adequate categories for thinking about resurrection. Nothing in our materialist paradigm makes room for such an event. The medical establishment maybe can accept testimonies of near death experiences and lights at the end of tunnels, but it does not allow for people three days dead to be suddenly walking around. Bible critics don't want us to believe this either – they point to the discrepancies in the four gospel accounts and say how can you believe a story that no one can get straight. Historians and anthropologists don't believe it – wishful thinking they say, but modern men and women don't need fairy tales – better to grow up and accept the finality of death and so on.

In the face of such disbelief, the temptation is to try and respond to doubters on their own terms. So some try to provide historical evidence of the resurrection. Tom Wright is one of today's most prominent theologians and that is the approach he takes. What, he asks, could have galvanized a disorganized band of unschooled fishermen into a powerful church in such a short time. How else to account for their resurgence from the depths of despair into a risk taking, bold, missionary movement than the FACT of the resurrection. In other words, it must be true because so many people believe it.

But of course that's not very convincing. Gullible people have believed many things over the course of history that turned out to be wrong. Believing the earth was flat did not make it so, nor did believing in the invincibility of the 3rd Reich make it the Kingdom of God. The argument from history is not compelling. Today in fact many people do NOT believe the resurrection – does that make it false?

The other great temptation is to reduce the resurrection to a literary symbol of the hope that springs eternal in the human breast, the idea that Jesus lives on but only in the memories of his followers.

After years of reading and preaching Easter sermons, Fleming Rutledge has a thick file that she labels, "100 ways to avoid saying that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead." Among her favorites are such bromides as

On Easter day the world takes a turn for the better

Just as spring causes the sap to rise in the trees so it brings new hope to the heart of humans, (as if Jesus was a spring chicken or a tulip bulb)

Not much trembling there.

But the biblical message is uncompromising, paying little attention to modern skepticism and the self-imposed limitations of our stunted imaginations. He is Risen! He is not here! The bible offers neither historical proof, nor satisfying apologetic to make resurrection palatable to our sophisticated sensibilities, nor does it morph it into mere metaphor for some arbitrary human hopefulness. The bible simply announces and expects us to believe that: ***He is risen, he is not here.***

Paul puts it in strong language:

If it is preached that Christ is raised from the dead, then how can some of you say that there is no resurrection from the dead. If there is no resurrection from the dead then Christ has not been raised either, and if Christ is not raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith, and more than that we are false witnesses about God... if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still captive to sin, and we are to be pitied above all fools.

Christian faith is not made unique by its teaching about forgiveness or non-violence, or by the golden rule to love your neighbour, but by the announcement that God has done the impossible; he brought Jesus back from the dead and has thus overcome all resistance to love. All the forces of darkness that were concentrated on skull mountain to offer their fiercest resistance to the love of God in Christ, could not quench love, could not prevail over mercy, could not resist righteousness, could not undo the invasion of the Kingdom of God into our time and space.

God refusing our refusal....

He is not here. He is risen!

The light has come into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it, not the darkness of Good Friday, not the darkness of our self-deceptions, not the darkness of violence, not the darkness of pride and arrogance – the darkness cannot overcome the Light of the World.

Belief in the Resurrection is indispensable to Christian faith, but this does not mean that the resurrection message is meant to be understood rationally, not really. Who can understand it. It does not accommodate itself to any other way of knowing other than simple trust itself. It is not meant to be analyzed and subjected to various theories or tests to determine its credibility. We cannot explain resurrection, or make belief acceptable to its critics.

Belief in the resurrection does not call for a suspension of disbelief (such as you might need when reading magical realism), or for normally thoughtful people to become momentarily gullible and silly. More importantly, it calls for a childlike trust that we live in a world where God's possibility always exceeds human impossibility, where God's yes word always overcomes our no words. It calls for wonder and amazement that the God who called forth the creation from the waters of chaos, who brought forth life from old Sarah's barren womb, God who liberated a band of Nomads from the controlling empires of Egypt and Babylon, this God is still alive and active in history, repairing the ruins, turning our mourning into dancing, rolling away stones, reversing the tide.

We say die, God says live;

we say abandon, and God says adoption;

we say drown and God says, rise up,

we say hunger and God says Manna

we say Thirst and God says living water

we say More, God says Sabbath

we say war and God says peace;

we say fear and God says, be not afraid,

we say revenge and God says, forgiveness;

we say Good Friday and God says Easter Sunday

God will always have the last word, and because we belong to God, the last word is spoken for us and to us, and it has the power to create us anew

Can you believe it?

One last story... Joachim Segger told me of a visit he made to his father in the nursing home when he was quite old, suffering from dementia. It was good Friday and Joachim asked his dad if he knew what had happened that day. No, said dad, what? Well, said Joachim, that's the day that Jesus died on the cross. Oh no, that's terrible, said dad. But you know what happened a few days later on Sunday? No, what? Well he was raised up from the dead – he was alive again, said Joachim. In a moment of astonished and wide eyed wonder his father said Wow! You've got to be kidding!

Christ is Risen -

Can you believe it?