

“CHRIST IS RISEN, INDEED!”

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Aldous Huxley said: "Every life, when viewed from the inside, is a succession of failures." It rings true, doesn't it? For only we can see everything that could have been, everything that should have been and the many chances we wasted. Many of us secretly carry a palpable sense of failure within us until others relieve us of it.

This is Mary and Martha's feverish internal dialogue, slogging silently forward, trudging to Jesus' grave gripped by a defeated inner darkness within the predawn light. Do you know how after big failures, we replay it all--what we should have done, what we might have said, and how it might have mattered--over and over in our head? It surely made for a fitful night's sleep; it propels their mission to anoint Jesus' body. Their footsteps were positively leaden on the path to his tomb.

As they walk an earthquake rattles any remaining familiar certainties beneath their feet. But this earthquake was mild compared to how the Cross had grabbed them by the scruff of the neck, and shaken the bedrock of their Jesus-given new claim on life. An angel descends from heaven and rolls back the stone sealing Jesus' tomb. And this angel looks like anything but a cowering, cringing, shrinking failure.

Matthew describes his presence as "like lightning, his clothing as white as snow." From the exultant, even brazen way the angel alights on that stone door--the king of his spiritual castle--we see he had attitude. For that very boulder and the seal of Pilate, with guards posted, was meant to close off the possibility of Jesus rising. Was it the same angel who appeared to Jesus' mother Mary 33 years before to announce Jesus' birth; the same angel who told Joseph in a dream to take Mary as his wife? Maybe he asked to see through to the end this holy project he launched.

The Roman guards are so stricken to see--is that a *grinning angel* sitting atop our almighty imperial boulder meant to prevent any surprises? They inwardly dissolve. Matthew said they were "like dead men." Striking how those who see themselves as having the power—in this case by keeping the dead entombed—themselves get relegated to death. And those who thought Jesus as dead as a doornail hear from this bold, gentle angel not only that Jesus is alive, but he has made plans. Jesus has gone ahead of them to Galilee, expecting to receive them and others.

If one thing was certain as Mary and Martha awoke that day, it was that Roman imperial violence had gotten the final word, just like so many times before. Not a flicker of doubt beat in their breasts about who had won that encounter atop Golgotha, and who had lost. That brash angel with the attitude turns all this around.

"Don't be afraid," the angel calms the woman who can't grasp this turn of fortune. "Be very afraid," was the angel's implicit message to the armed guards whose job it was to strike fear into anyone daring to mess with omnipotent imperial decrees.

Mary and Martha shift from grinding failure to perplexed awe as they depart Jesus' tomb. Maybe they fear this great good news might flee and evaporate as quickly as it came to light. Maybe they fear the truth of the simple words, "He is risen," that the true and living God finally gets the last word. This much is sure: they no longer fear the violent power of Roman warriors assigned to bully Israel into submission. They no longer fear that the highest things spoken by the best people will finally add up to nothing, and that their loftiest hope has crashed and burned.

As Mary and Martha rush from the tomb to tell the others, Jesus interrupts them. Jesus greets them. They recognize him. They bow to hold his feet and worship him. It's no ghost of a man, but all of the man, Jesus. He is different now but he is the same Jesus as who had turned their lives around, turned *this world* around. That's the Easter story, courtesy of Matthew. So what'll you and I now do with it?

Typically, I've learned over the years that modern rational cause-and-effect types like ourselves who crave proof, come to church on Easter with the mentality: well, you are the religious expert. And I am the religion consumer. So *explain* it to me. Make it understandable to me with logic or categories that already exist within me. Many assume my job is to render this incredible tale comprehensible on our terms and to drain all of the mystery out of it until you nod and say: yeah, I can see that.

My response is no can do. Or rather I've tried that in the past and decline to do so. Of course, I prize the mind's ability to penetrate, grasp, order and assimilate data as much as the next guy. But at Easter I think stupefaction is a pretty great thing. What that means is there's nothing sensible or reasonable about the resurrection.

Only arrogance would submit Easter to the fleeting logic of today's intellectual systems to tell God what's possible. Truly, by Jesus rising God in Christ has revealed and introduced a transformative alternative logic that comes from far beyond us. Make it reasonable on our terms? I say, God has done the incomprehensible without asking our permission. How about falling dumbstruck on our knees like Mary and Martha, wonder-struck at the possibilities of miracles we had never imagined?

And do you know what else? Even if you were to request me to make tidy and reasonable the existential blast and pivot called *resurrection*, I don't believe you really want it. For you wouldn't respect such an earthbound God in the morning. I mean, if God is nothing more than the sound of our human reasoning in a louder voice, why worship this God? Why serve this God? Why give our lives over to this God? Yes, maybe I'm slow. It has taken me a while. But I have learned that despite our superficial craving of proof, we long for a God who can't be contained, confined or even in the last analysis fully described at a much deeper place within our soul.

Maybe that's why the best Easter declaration is from Paul writing to Corinth: "Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

Or check this out. When you are a pastor, you aren't invited to certain parties for fear that bawdy jokes might get told or certain profane observations shared. Then again, other party hosts will actively seek you out. It's so because often comes a moment when someone seeing too far into the bottom of his cup approaches you, and levels this broadside, "Religion has caused most of the wars in this world. It is about time you put all that superstition away, wake up, and accept life as it is. What's with you anyway, embracing fantasies of hocus pocus and eternal life."

You can't hire a floor show for entertainment this good, can you? I know this drill. I wait patiently until the skeptic exhausts himself. I avoid the maelstrom of vapors that are his breath. Then I say, "Look, if don't want God's incomparable gift, that's fine. I not here to talk you into it or talk you out of rejecting it. I just ask one favor. As your mortal life expires and you come face to face with the true and living God after he's raised you from dust and your jaw drops to the floor, don't act shocked. Remember this conversation right now. Don't complain no one told you. And go in peace, friend." As you can tell, I take my leads from the angel atop that boulder.

So rather than force Easter to fit our terms, I'm here to shape your lives until they are intelligible on God's terms. Mary and Martha went from timid and intimidated to defying imperial power in light of Jesus' resurrection. I charge you to live out decisions, priorities, dreams, hopes and goals that radiate and reflect *resurrection*. I know, part of us still craves proof. But God expects our words and deeds as his living testimony, better than any proof to proclaim resurrection in a doubting world.

So let's rehearse this, shall we, starting with our most basic message: "Alleluia, Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Alleluia." That wasn't so hard, was it? Amen.