

“The Evolution of Resurrection Belief”

Luke 24: 1-11

¹Now upon the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they came unto the sepulchre, bringing the spices which they had prepared, and certain others with them. And they found the stone rolled away from the sepulchre. ³And they entered in, and found not the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴And it came to pass, as they were much perplexed thereabout, behold, two men stood by them in shining garments: ⁵And as they were afraid, and bowed down their faces to the earth, they said unto them, Why seek ye the living among the dead? ⁶He is not here, but is risen: remember how he spake unto you when he was yet in Galilee, ⁷Saying, The Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again. ⁸And they remembered his words, ⁹And returned from the sepulchre, and told all these things unto the eleven, and to all the rest. ¹⁰It was Mary Magdalene and Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, and other women that were with them, which told these things unto the apostles. ¹¹*And their words seemed to them as idle tales, and they believed them not.*

John 20: 24-25 and 21:1-3

But Thomas, one of the twelve, called Didymus, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵The other disciples therefore said unto him, We have seen the LORD. But he said unto them, Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the

¹After these things Jesus shewed himself again to the disciples at the sea of Tiberias; and on this wise shewed he himself. ²There were together Simon Peter, and Thomas called Didymus, and Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, and the sons of Zebedee, and two other of his disciples. ³Simon Peter saith unto them, I go a fishing. They say unto him, We also go with thee. They went forth, and entered into a ship immediately; and that night they caught nothing.

Listening to the radio the other day (briefly, I generally prefer the silence to the "talking heads" that are so prominent on radio and television), a man was being interviewed about today being the end of the world...something about an earthquake, the rapture, the Bible guaranteeing it, etc. This was not a "religious" radio station, which points to just how popular and pervasive this idea was. So, I was excited to learn that I didn't need to write a sermon for this week.

The guy they were talking to was utterly convinced Saturday would be the end of the world, and he didn't sound "crazy," though he certainly was someone incapable, or unwilling, to respond to logical questions. The radio announcer asked him several times, "So can I call you Monday morning for a follow up interview?" And the only answer was, "I won't be here." "But if you are, can I call you," was the reply each time, and each and every time, the answer was the same (though it took longer each time to say it), "I won't be here."

One of two things will happen: (a) the radio announcer will call him Monday and he will not answer but it will be because the earthquake was a "spiritual" quake, and the prophet and his followers have experienced a "spiritual" rapture, and it's just materially-minded people like us who don't "see" it; or, (b) the "prophet" will answer the phone, and he will agree it did not happen, BUT it did not happen because he made one tiny error in his Biblical calculations, and now that he has that corrected that tiny error the new date for the end of the world is.....

Apocalyptic moments, or at least apocalyptic predictions, make international news. Promised apocalyptic moments are exciting.

This is the fifth Sunday in the Easter season, and since the first day of the season was Sunday, April 24, this is now the 29th day of the Easter season. The Church's Easter season reflects the New Testament witness that Jesus, beginning with that first tomb-emptying, resurrection morning, appeared to people for forty days, and then on that fortieth day, he "ascended" back to God. Then, ten days following this heaven-rending event, the soul-transforming event of Pentecost occurred, with Pentecost marking a new season.

Therefore, next Sunday will be the sixth Sunday of Easter, followed by Ascension Day on Thursday, June 2, and then Saturday June 4 being the 49th and final day of the Easter season, followed by Sunday, June 5th being Pentecost Sunday.

Many people get a little impatient with anything that takes 49 days...enough is enough already. We've had our ham, worn our new clothes, had the family gathering— come on now, let's get back to normal. We live in a fast-paced, give it to me now culture, so prolonging anything for forty-nine days seems highly unnecessary. If the apocalypse had been predicted to slowly occur over a forty-nine day period, it would not have generated the same amount of interest.

We want to get Easter done and over with in part because there are other holidays, national, not church, holidays, like, Mother's Day, Armed Forces Day, and Memorial Day. There are many other lesser holidays for those who just can't get enough of them: the National Day of Prayer, May Friendship Day, Cinco de Mayo; and, did you know that this past Wednesday was National Popcorn Day?

Even the Presbyterian Church (USA) adds clutter to the mess: the denominational calendar encourages the celebration of the following on these seven Sundays of Easter:

Rural Life Ministry Sunday, Health Awareness Sunday, Wills Emphasis Sunday (which I find interesting for the third Sunday of Easter, as if to say, “We believe in resurrection, but first you’re going to die so make sure the church gets some of your money”), Multicultural Church Sunday, Immigration Sunday, and Presbyterian Heritage Sunday.

In the midst of all these possibilities, or burdens depending on your view point, we also have jobs to attend, families to care for, medical treatments to go through, bills to pay, meetings to attend, and television show season finales to watch. I mean, really, who has time for forty-nine days of Easter? For God’s sake, he was dead, he was resurrected, hallelujah, now let’s get on with it and return to our ordinary lives.

The Apostle Peter agreed. “I’m going fishing,” he said. For Peter, that meant, “I’m going back to work.” Enough of this waiting around Easter stuff. Let’s get on with our lives. And this after Jesus has appeared to him twice. Twice the resurrected Jesus, like the king’s ghost in *Hamlet*, strangely appeared to Peter and the others, and yet, after such appearances, they wake on another manic Monday and say, “Well, it’s back to work as usual.” What began as an idle tale and non-sense, remains so, or, if it hasn’t remained an idle tale and non-sense, if Peter and others have in fact come to think there is something to this Jesus resurrected thing, nonetheless, it is still not something that has altered their everyday life. “I’m going fishing.” Easter is over, the good china has been cleaned and put back in the china closet until Thanksgiving, let’s move on.

And Peter is right to do so, and so are we, only Peter’s motivation may not be right. Peter seems to be returning to the ordinary in a “give up, it’s not really real” attitude. What he has yet to learn is that returning to the ordinary does not exclude the experiencing the extraordinary. The extraordinary is in fact experienced in the ordinary, even through forty-nine long ordinary days, or a life-time of rather ordinary days.

There is an unspoken evolution of belief going on beneath the several stories of Jesus’ resurrection appearances, as well as in the words, “I’m going fishing.” Belief has begun to percolate in the soul but the usual routines are still all we know, all we can find the will to do. And yet, “They caught nothing.” Once belief begins to percolate within the soul, the usual routines, though still the place for revelation, no longer yield the usual results. The things we once thought important begin to lose significance, as we experience the extraordinary. The prizes we once cherished lose their luster: the places and people and things which once brought satisfaction, now, not so much. We have not yet experienced Pentecostal transformation: that is still to come, but we are beginning to feel something, experience if only occasionally and elusively, something of the extraordinary—an unusual and disturbing presence of peace in the midst of fear, a familiar yet strange voice piercing through deathly silence, a familiar face in an unfamiliar form, and having begun to experience such presence of the extraordinary, now the emptiness of ordinary begins to be felt. “They caught nothing.”

The apostles needed forty-nine days for the evolution of belief to work its way into their bones, for the extraordinary living presence of the resurrected Jesus to become real enough to reveal and shatter the hollowness of their ordinary routines, for them to be

transformed not only on one Sunday morning out of the year, but for them to be transformed throughout the year, within all their ordinary days.

This kind of belief doesn't happen over-night. This kind of belief does come in apocalyptic moments. This kind of belief doesn't happen with just one or two encounters with the holy. This kind of belief takes time to brew. Forty-nine days are nothing if it leads to something extraordinary like resurrection belief, resurrection life. And if it does not lead to something extraordinary, forty-nine days, and indeed, an entire life, is, after-all, nothing, nothing but dust to dust and ashes to ashes.