

# RIDICULOUS VICTORY

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*JOHN 20:1-18; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:19-26*

*LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH*

*BY: RYAN DUECK*

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Easter is a pretty ridiculous thing.

Actually, this is true of pretty much every important day on the Christian calendar.

There is a ridiculous quality to so much of what we as Christians claim.

**Christmas**—God-in-flesh, born in a feed trough to a teenaged peasant girl. Not what we expected.

**The Sermon on the Mount**—a naïve approach to life if ever there was one, a recipe for little more than getting taken advantage of and abused in life... Not what we expected.

**Palm Sunday**—the “triumphal entry” of a king... on a *donkey*... talking about peace... Not what we expected.

**Maundy Thursday**—a master who washes feet... Not what we expected.

Good Friday... a Messiah, executed like a common criminal, going out with hardly a whimper... Not what we expected.

And now, Easter Sunday— the defeat of death?? Not what *anyone* expected.

Last Sunday I quoted N.T. Wright in saying that Palm Sunday is “an object lesson in the mismatch between our expectations and God’s answer.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> N.T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part Two* (London: SPCK, 2002), 69.

This is actually true of *every* aspect of the Christian story.

In 1 Corinthians 1, The Apostle Paul calls this the message of Christ “foolishness.”

Over thousands of years, it’s easy can forget just how foolish it is (or ought to be).

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What could be more ridiculous, after all, but to claim, as we just heard in 1 Corinthians, that *death* has been defeated?

What does that even mean?

Death is all around us.

It fills the pages of our newspapers each day where we read of wars and bombings and terror attacks and famines and diseases and tragedies (this morning, we think particularly of the family in Manitoba whose toddler wandered off...).

But death is much more mundane than newspaper headlines.

100% of the people in this room will die.

Plants die. Pets die. Dreams die. Relationships die. We are a people who are well acquainted with death.

And *yet*, on this Easter Sunday, Christians around the world make the ridiculous claim that *death* has been defeated because the stone was rolled away and the tomb was found empty.

How can we say this?

**Is not this whole rising from the dead thing too much to ask of twenty-first century educated believers?**

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We should begin by reminding ourselves that it was an awful lot to ask of first century believers, as well!

As it happens, first century people were aware that dead people were not in the habit of coming alive again.

It's not as though this were a common occurrence back then, and that first century people were uniquely naïve, expecting people to be popping out of their graves on a regular basis!

Each of the gospel accounts of the resurrection makes this plain. *Nobody* was expecting what happened to happen.

I was thinking about these questions this week as I reread the four gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection.

What struck me as I read these familiar stories was how incredibly *odd* the reaction of those first witnesses really was.

In Mark, the women's reaction to the news that Jesus is risen is to flee, "trembling and bewildered... because they were afraid."

Luke reports that the disciples refused to believe the women at first—"their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11)—and that two of them didn't even recognize Jesus as he walked with them on the road to Emmaus.

Matthew's account is probably the most triumphant of the bunch, but even here it says that some among the eleven disciples doubted, *even after seeing Jesus in the flesh*.

And in the gospel of John, confusion and chaos reigns.

Mary Magdalene sees the stone rolled away and rushes off to tell the disciples. Peter and "the other disciple" come rushing back and peer into the tomb, needing to see for themselves that the tomb is empty, not relying on the testimony of Mary.

They see the strips of linen lying neatly in the tomb. And, it says that the "other disciple" "saw and believed."

But at this point, it seems that all he believed was that Mary wasn't lying, that the tomb really *was* empty. Even when they see the strips of linen lying there, they still don't have any clue that Jesus might have risen from the dead, as verse 9 makes plain:

They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.

Even while staring at an empty tomb.

And Mary? Well, she returned with the disciples to the tomb. But rather than joy or even perplexed wonder, she just stands there and weeps.

Hardly the joyous response you might imagine if discovering an empty tomb were the eagerly anticipated good news of the defeat of death!

**After reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, we could be forgiven for thinking that the first witnesses are rather confused, sluggish, even *reluctant* participants in God's great moment of triumph over evil, sin, and death.**

The composite picture painted by the writers of the four gospels is of a hope that was thrust almost unwillingly upon its first witnesses.

It's not as though the people who had seen Jesus executed on a Roman cross were sitting on pins and needles until the third day thinking, "will he or won't he?! I wonder if Jesus will rise from the dead and conquer death?"

Despite Jesus' predictions, *nobody expected this*.

The stories simply do not read this way. They are full of confusion and fear and doubt at every turn.

**The church of Jesus Christ was quite literally shocked into existence by the resurrection, by the stunned testimony of those first witnesses who arrived at an empty tomb to honour a dead friend and departed with the surprise of their lives.**

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So, on this Easter Sunday, 2016? Is our hope big enough for this surprise?

**Perhaps another way of asking the question would be to say, are our enemies whose defeat we await big enough for a crucified king and an empty tomb?**

It is easy to make the resurrection too small. We can come to think of the resurrection as a pleasant springtime metaphor about the possibility of newness.

This morning, I looked out my office window and the sun was rising, and it was beautiful, and I thought, isn't this symbolic of how there's always a new day and we can always start again and new possibilities in life.

But the resurrection of Jesus is about so much more than sunrises and flowers blooming and pleasant springtime metaphors.

This is what our text from 1 Corinthians points to.

For Paul, the resurrection isn't just the cherry on top of the Christian cake or a happy ending tacked on at the end of a long and meandering story or an inspiring symbol of God's promise of new possibilities for our lives.

If the resurrection is only a nice metaphor for hope in this life, Paul says, we are **objects of pity**.

Not "a little misguided." Not "basically right, except for the ending part." Not "on the right track." Not "beneficiaries of a psychologically useful way to cope with the difficulties of life."

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

I don't know about you, but I don't like being pitied!

Why would Paul say this? Surely, Paul ought to concede that even without the resurrection, Jesus is still a pretty inspiring guy who said some pretty cool things about love and peace and forgiveness and compassion. Right?

Paul apparently doesn't think so.

Perhaps because Paul knows that without the resurrection, Jesus is nothing more than another failed Messiah, his teaching, while perhaps inspiring, ultimately as useless and futile as a way of life as it proved to be for him, ending in disappointment, betrayal, and execution.

It's worth pausing on this. For those who imagine that we can (and should!) leave behind all this superstitious nonsense about a dead guy coming to life and just focus on Jesus' inspiring teachings, we should probably ask, *Without the resurrection, what did those inspiring teachings, that way of living and loving accomplish for Jesus?* We might expect the same.

And without the resurrection, can we imagine the church bursting forth into the world and turning it upside down with their commitment to follow this teaching? Not likely.

It's far easier to imagine the first disciples quivering and quaking by the tomb for a few days, and then going back to business as usual.

Without this ridiculously unexpected thing, none of this gets off the ground.

The resurrection is not an optional extra. The resurrection is God's validation of all that Jesus was and did and said and modeled!

**The resurrection is God's s glorious affirmation that life will outlive death.**

It God's decisive act to vindicate Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as the defeat of the power of sin and evil and all that holds his children captive AND to validate Jesus as the example of what a truly human life looks like.

The giving of bread, the healing of disease, the challenge of injustice, the washing of feet, the listening, the rebuking, the inspiring, the raising, the confusing, the illuminating, the loving, the suffering... everything about who Jesus was and what he did is given God's stamp of approval in the empty tomb.

Everything about who Jesus was, everything about what he did and taught, everything he showed us, every possibility he opened for us, *everything* receives one big "YES" at the resurrection.

Yes, this is how the world is made new.

Follow him. He showed the way.

Emulate him. This is what it means to truly live.

Trust him. He will never leave or forsake you.

Confess and believe. He will forgive and redeem.

Look to him. He will show you what new life looks like, now and in the life to come.

Give yourself to this “foolish” king and his way in the world and discover the deepest wisdom that the world will ever know.

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I’ve talked a lot this morning about how unlikely this Easter story was and is, about how even those first participants in the story had no clue what was really going on.

Eventually, though, they do begin to get it. It’s interesting to notice when. And how.

When does Mary finally clue in that the gardener is Jesus? Not when they’re having a conversation. Not even when she’s looking right at him.

When he calls her by name.

That’s when the scales fall from her eyes. This is when she sees the incredible truth.

I bought this little olivewood statue in Bethlehem a few weeks ago. It’s been sitting on my desk ever since I got back.

There were all kinds of other statues there—statues of Jesus on the cross, statues of lions and lambs, elaborate carvings of the last supper.

But this one stuck out. Jesus going after the one lost sheep. It was a reminder to me that at the end of it all, our Christian faith is not a theological system or a theory or a rational proof or even a mystical experience.

It is a personal call from one who knows us by name and who loves us.

Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus says this:

The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. **3** The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and **the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.** (John 10:2-3).

At the end of it all, the resurrection of Christ makes a personal claim on us. The one whose life is the very defeat of death, speaks to us, calls us by name.

Mary. John. Peter. Fred. Kevin. Lana. Elian. Zachary.

*Will you trust? Will you follow? Will you believe this ridiculous, foolish, magnificent story about a life and a death and a life anew that is big enough and strong enough and holy and hopeful enough to defeat death itself?*

*Will you accept my call to participate in this foolishness, living and loving as I have commanded you, knowing that this foolish living and loving is not something to be pitied, but part of the way in which I am making all things new?*

14 “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd. 17 The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again.

This is our God. The crucified king. The risen Lord of history. The righteous judge who will do what is just over all the world.

The good shepherd who calls his children by name, who lays down his life for his sheep, only to take it up again.

This is the ridiculous, holy foolishness that is the salvation of the world.

Thanks be to God.



We are going to close our service today with an opportunity to give physical expression to this joy, this hope, the surprise of resurrection.

During our final song, you are invited to come to the front and place a flower (or two or three) on this cross.

The symbolism is powerful. Beauty and colour gradually taking over this symbol of torture and execution. Life overwhelming death.

As you come and place a flower on this cross, I want you to also think about how the resurrection is not some abstract theory about the nature of the universe or the fate of the world, but a personal summons to you. The resurrected Lord of history is also the good shepherd who knows us, who loves us, who calls us by name.

And each flower placed on this cross is a declaration of who we are and what we aspire to be.

We are foolish people committed to being people of light and life, people who share the hope of Jesus in the world.

We are resurrection people.