

WHAT ARE WE WAITING FOR?

ISAIAH 25:6-9; JOHN 20:1-18

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Today is *the* day.

The day without which nothing else matters, the day without which the darkness of Good Friday wins.

This is the day the stone is rolled away and the tomb is found to be empty!

This is the *best* day. This is Resurrection Day.

Every year around this time, I say something to my wife Naomi along the lines of, “How can I possibly say anything new, something that hasn’t been said far better than I could say it about this day?!”

And she always wisely reminds me, “Your job isn’t to say anything new. It’s to say something very old that we need to keep hearing.”

She’s right, of course.

We keep telling this story of all stories.

But the old, old story is always told in particular times and places, isn’t it? And it is always heard with new ears.

Our particular time and place is one where it is easy—so easy, all these years later—for the church and for the world to settle for smaller hopes than the hope that this day of all days holds before us.

“Resurrection” language is so often substituted for vague sentiments about “new directions” or the “promise of spring after a long winter” (a metaphor that seems admittedly strained on this snowy Easter Sunday! ☺) or “making positive changes in our lives.”

The resurrection is reduced to harmless metaphors by people too intelligent and sophisticated to believe that a dead man could live.

And then there are those who think even resurrection as “inspiring metaphor” is a waste of time. There are many who think that the Christian hope in resurrection is harmful idealistic nonsense—that it is nothing more than a fiction embraced by people unable or unwilling to face the truth that the world simply isn’t a hopeful place.

Last year around this time, I happened upon an article in the *New York Times* by Simon Critchley called “Abandon (Nearly) All Hope.”¹ As the title suggests, the author has little use for hope.

Hope is useful for political campaigns but not much else—for selling things to uncritical consumers or manipulating people into believing in all kinds of fanciful things for which there is no evidence.

The article is a call to sober realism. Here’s how it ends:

But unless [our] hopes are realistic we will end up in a blindly hopeful (and therefore hopeless) idealism. Prodigal hope invites despair only when we see it fail. In giving up the former, we might also avoid the latter. This is not an easy task, I know. But we should try.

Is Simon Critchley right? Is hope little more than a useful tool for the cynically pragmatic as they seek to get dreamy sheep to do their bidding?

Ought we to adopt a more realistic approach to life, and abandon all this useless rhetoric about life coming out of death, light out of darkness, goodness out of evil?

¹ http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/04/19/abandon-nearly-all-hope/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=2

It's been a long time, after all, since Jesus was claimed to have risen from the dead, and our world still contains so much evil and suffering and hopelessness. Sometimes it *seems* like new creation is no closer to being a reality now than it was then.

On this Easter weekend, are the skeptics right? Is all this business about Jesus rising from the dead and defeating death just a pleasant fiction invented by the first disciples because they couldn't bear to think accept the cold hard truth that Jesus was really dead?

I was thinking about these questions yesterday 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—at least if we are expecting to see a cast of characters desperate grasping around for any kind of hope to make them feel better.

If this, the moment where Christian hope was born, was a flight from reality into the comforting embrace of illusory and convenient fiction, it is a very strange sort of flight.

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.

(An interesting sidebar: It's noteworthy that the first people that risen Jesus appeared to were women. Aside from the many things that this might have to say about gender and how Jesus upended cultural stereotypes, relying on the word of women would not be a great pragmatic strategy in a cultural context where the testimony of women was not respected, carried zero weight in legal proceedings, for example, where the presence of a woman would never count toward a quorum in synagogue... If the first disciples were looking to make up a plausible story about Jesus rising from the dead, they hardly would have included women in it as the first witnesses, nor would they have made themselves look so slow to believe!)

At any rate, 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 good news!

Of course, there are also scenes of exultant joy in these gospel accounts, but this is hardly the reaction that stands out.

One could be forgiven, after reading the four gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus and the events immediately afterward, 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.

The resurrection of Jesus as the firstborn of God's new creation was not a hope that anyone was waiting for!

Whatever else we might want to say about the Christian hope, the idea that the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was a hastily assembled fabrication dreamed up by a bunch of heartsick idealists who were longing for a hope to provide comfort and meaning doesn't even get off the ground.

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

Simon Critchley thinks we ought to abandon (nearly) all hope.

It seems to me that this is pretty much exactly what the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection did.

Until hope-in-person rudely interrupted all the realism and dragged them along for the ride.

The church of Jesus Christ was quite literally shocked into existence by the resurrection.

But the shock can wear off. Indeed, I think the shock *has* worn off.

The story of the resurrection so easily becomes the happy ending of a story in a holy book rather than the axis upon which all of history turns.

Sometimes we need to see with new eyes, to hear with new ears.

I want to read an retelling of the story of Mary at the tomb. This is from Francis Spufford's marvelous little book called *Unapologetic* on the beauty of the Christian story in a skeptical world:

The friends creep out at dusk and ask for the body, promising anonymous burial and no fuss. They're allowed to carry it away, wrapped in a tube of line that slowly stains from inside. Skull Hill sees lots of such corteges. There's only time to stick what's left of Yeshua hastily in the rock tomb by the highway. Washing

the corpse properly and laying it out will have to wait; the holy Saturday is coming, and no one wants any confrontations.

All day long, the next day, the city is quiet. The air above the city lacks the usual thousand little trails of smoke from cookfires. Hymns rise from the temple. Families are indoors. The soldiers are back in barracks. The Chief Priest grows hoarse with singing. The governor plays chess with his secretary and dictates letters.

The free bread the temple distributed to the poor has gone stale by midday, but tastes all right dipped in water or broth. Death has interrupted life only as much as it ever does. We die one at a time and disappear, but the life of the living continues. The earth turns. The sun makes its way toward the western horizon no slower or faster than it usually does.

Early Sunday morning, one of the friends comes back with rags and a jug of water and a box of the grave spices that are supposed to cut down on the smell. She's braced for the task. But when she comes to the grave, she finds that the linen's been thrown into the corner and the body is gone. Evidently anonymous burial isn't quite anonymous enough, after all. She sits outside in the sun. The insects have woken up, here at the edge of the desert, and a bee is nosing about in a lily like silk thinly tucked over itself, but much more perishable. It won't last long.

She takes no notice of the feet that appear at the edge of her vision....

Don't be afraid, says Yeshua. Far more can be mended than you know.²

Far more can be mended than you know.

Yes, I believe this is true. An empty tomb tells me so.

Those first witnesses to the resurrection were witnesses to the greatest surprise in all of history.

² Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 147-48.

They were waiting for a victorious king like every other king the world had ever known, but they got something entirely different.

They got a king whose coronation was a crucifixion and for whom liberation meant not just the deliverance of a harassed and occupied ethnic group on the margins of the Roman Empire, but the rescue and redemption of humanity, all of creation.

They didn't know what they were waiting for, in the deepest part of themselves, until they saw it—slowly, haltingly, barely-believingly, but eventually joyfully and hopefully!—in an empty tomb.

And what about us?

What are we waiting for, on this Easter Sunday, 2015? Is our hope big enough for this surprise?

It is easy to make the resurrection too small. We can come to think of the resurrection as a really neat magic trick that God performed once upon a time—and if we can believe in this trick with enough conviction, one day God will allow us into heaven.

The physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus and the promise of new creation that it promises, becomes mostly about what happens after we die.

But the resurrection of Jesus is far bigger and better news than.

It is the new beginning of all creation.

It is God's vindication of Jesus of Nazareth, and all that he did, all that he taught. It is God's stamp of approval on this life, this death. It is God saying, "this is the true human, the new Adam."

It is the defeat of death and evil and pain, and the promise of the liberation of all creation from its bondage to decay.

It is the triumph of life over all that would threaten to steal and corrupt it.

It is the hope that there is nothing—*nothing!* No sickness, no pain, no failure, no trial—that can finally separate us from the love of God (Romans 8:38-39) and from the future that he has promised to those who cling to him.

And speaking of the future, this brings us to the words from Isaiah that we heard earlier.

I'm simply going to read the passage again.

I want us to listen to these words of the prophet through the lens of an empty tomb and a collection of women and disciples shocked into joy and love and hope by something that they were never waiting for, but soon came to realize, was what they had *always* been waiting for.

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day, **Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him**, so that he might save us. **This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.**

This is the Lord from whom we have waited. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Amen.



We are going to close our service today with an opportunity to give physical expression to this joy, this hope, the jaw-dropping 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.

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

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

We are resurrection people.