

God of the Gap

Matthew 28:1-10; Acts 10:34-43

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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There's a quote that I read every Easter Sunday. It's actually a short prayer written by Brian McLaren. I've shared it many times before, but I want to share it again today.

Dear Lord, I pray for all the pastors today
Who will feel enormous pressure to have their sermon
Match the greatness of the subject
and will surely feel they have failed.
(I pray even more for those who think they have succeeded.)

I am under no illusions that my Easter Sunday sermon will match the greatness of the subject. There is and will always be an inevitable gap between the reality and the proclamation.

This is true of the Christian life more generally. I was reminded of this while listening to a podcast this week.

It was an interview with a woman named Zena Hitz, an analytic philosopher whose life has a bit of an uncommon trajectory.¹

She was raised by decidedly irreligious parents in San Francisco and converted to Roman Catholicism as an adult. That, alone makes her odd, in these post-Christian days in the West!

Then, in her late thirties she did something even more radical. She sold her possessions, left her job, and spent three years living in an "apostolate."

What, you might be wondering, is an apostolate? Well, here's how Hitz describes it:

¹ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/a-philosopher-takes-on-religious-life/id1081584611?i=1000607681151>

It's similar to a monastic community in that the members make promises of poverty, chastity, and obedience... [P]overty means you don't earn money of your own. Chastity means celibacy and obedience means you do what the person in charge asks you to do.

Pretty radical step. Not one that many could imagine taking.

The interviewer, who I would describe as a curious agnostic, admired her commitment, her willingness to take Jesus seriously. At one point, he asked her a question about what she thought about the many people whose commitment to Jesus was, perhaps, less remarkable than hers.

I just wonder at what point does that gap... between what people claim to believe and how they live become such that they're not really Christians anymore?

I've been pondering that gap as I prepared for Easter Sunday.

We're all familiar with something like this, aren't we? The gap between the people we want to be and the people we actually are. The gap between the selves we present to the world and the selves we know in the privacy of our own minds.

I encounter a lot of people who feel like they're failing. Failing their kids, failing their spouses, failing their church, failing their colleagues or bosses, failing to realize their potential, failing to optimize, prioritize, maximize.

And, of course, failing God.

Christian faith can be a tricky thing. On the one hand, we believe that faith actually asks things of us.

It matters how we live our lives. It matters whether we give ourselves over to love and to the pursuit of justice and peace or to their ugly opposites.

It matters if we are oriented toward the inversion of value that the kingdom of God proclaims, where last are first and first are last, where the unlovely and broken, the poor and the needy, the ones constantly stepped on or stepped over are somehow "blessed" and reveal the priorities of God.

How we choose to live and who we choose to align ourselves with *matters*. We believe that God is constantly calling us to become the human beings that we were created to be, to live into the new life the resurrection promises.

And yet, on the other hand, Christian faith also speaks loudly of a grace that is available for all the failures and the misfits, the ones who keep on making the same dumb mistakes over and over again, the reckless and wasteful, those in crisis and those leaving a path of destruction in their wake.

The sinners who sin in ways that we can understand and those who sin in ways we'd prefer to distance ourselves from.

We believe that God shows up in all the ugly, un-sanitized corners of our world and our lives and speaks of a mercy that goes far beyond our scorekeeping.

Christianity is nothing if it is not also a word of hope for those who feel like they're coming in dead last in a game they barely understand.

Zena Hitz gets this. Here's how she responded to the question from her interviewer, *What about the gap?*

You don't know whether someone who looks like the most hypocritical, smarmy, fake Christian doesn't go home at the end of the day and says, good God, I am the most fake smarmy Christian... God, give me the grace tomorrow to be better... [I]t's not about at what point do you become a fake Christian, because at some point the door is always open to a nonbeliever or a believer to become a real Christian... For them to say, oh my gosh, what a mess I've made of my life. God, help me. That's all that it takes.

I love her response here. I love her refusal to cast herself as the “real” Christian as opposed to those other less serious Christians who could never imagine doing what she did for three years.

I love her emphasis upon grace.

Perhaps the most staggering truth of the gospel—the hope proclaimed by Easter—is that the ultimate reality with which we all have to deal is not a test that we succeed or fail at, but a Love that bursts out of an empty tomb, overwhelming all of our striving,

redeeming all of our failures, bridging the gap between the real and the ideal, reconfiguring the landscape of reality entirely.

Matthew's account of the resurrection of Jesus is perhaps the most dramatic of the four accounts.

Both when Jesus dies and when the stone is rolled away revealing an empty tomb, Matthew says some variation of "the earth shook." The landscape is reconfigured.

On the cross, when Jesus dies, we read what must surely be among the more puzzling paragraphs in the entire Bible:

⁵⁰ And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.

⁵¹ At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.

The earth shook, the rocks split ⁵² and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. ⁵³ They came out of the tombs after Jesus' resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

Then, three days later we see the words that we have already heard this morning:

After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

² There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. ³ His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. ⁴ The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

Two earthquakes: One when Jesus dies and one when he is raised from the dead.

Only Matthew presents Jesus' death and resurrection in this way.

All four gospels have the women at the tomb, the stone rolled away, and some kind of angelic presence. But only Matthew has the earthquakes. Why?

It's important to remember that the writers of the four gospels were not the equivalent of first century journalists who were attempting to present some kind of "objective," detached, or dispassionate account of the events around that first Easter.

So often we with all our historical distance from the first events come these stories and say, "just give me the facts." We get uneasy when the four gospels tell the story in different ways. We wonder about discrepancies and apparent contradictions. "Just tell me what happened," we say!

But this was not the way of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. History and theology were not separate disciplines, but necessarily intertwined.

These were companions of Jesus. They had watched him teach and preach and heal and perform signs and wonders.

They had been with him as he clashed with the religious authorities and the forces of the Roman Empire.

They had watched him suffer and die on a cruel Roman cross. They had deserted him in his moment of greatest need. They had failed the test.

And as they record these events decades later, their primary concern is not to relay a moment-by-moment transcript of events, but *what these things mean!*

The facts are not unimportant to them. Far from it. But they are not *just* relaying facts, they are eager to tell us what these facts meant to them and what they *did* in the world.

These are not people speaking about a mystical inner experience of how even though Jesus died, he remained alive in their hearts.

These are people who are grasping to understand and explain something utterly unexpected, something they were not prepared for, something that blew apart their categories for who God was and how God worked in the world.

And what the cross and empty tomb did was shake the foundations of the world. It was like worlds colliding.

The Jewish world that nurtured Jesus and kept alive the story of salvation... and the radical embrace of God's generosity, God's open embrace for all nations.

Law... and grace.

Justice... and mercy.

Humanity... and God.

Evil... and good.

Violence... and peace.

Misplaced expectations... and the surprising fulfillment of God's promises.

Despair... and hope.

Sin... and the free offer of forgiveness, as Peter proclaims in our text from Acts.

Death... and life.

All the gaps between reality and promise, bridged decisively and finally by God.

And all, of course, for love's sake. God's love is, of course, why the tomb was empty.

"Love" is a word that is easily reduced to less than what Easter demands of it.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the one on the cross, the one from whom we hid our faces, the one who did not open his mouth when he could have, the one who did not defend himself when he could have, the one who was crushed for our iniquity, the one whose punishment brought us peace.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the one who was betrayed by his friends and went to his death alone.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of the well-known words from 1 Corinthians 13:

[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends.

This week, when I think of the love of God, I think of an instrument of torture that has come to be a sign of love and adoration and beauty—something that we wear around our necks and decorate with flowers—because of who God is and what God has done.

The empty tomb proclaims that everlasting love and unfailing kindness are God's disposition to you and to me.

The last words we heard as we left the church on Thursday evening were these:

Go into the world and love
in the name of the One who loved you until the end.

In Christ, God has loved us to the end. But the end wasn't Thursday evening. The end wasn't Friday on that godforsaken cross.

This morning is the end that God loves us to. And the end turned out to be not an end at all but a beginning.

The end turned out to be life.

In saying that Jesus loved us to the *end*, to *his* end, to *our* end, even to the *world's* end, what Easter Sunday declares is that we are loved with an everlasting love into everlasting life.

This is good news. This is the very best news.

So, on this Easter Sunday...

If you feel like you're failing the test.

If you feel like your performance as a follower of Jesus is rather uninspiring.

If you feel like you're one of those less-impressive Christians who struggles to renounce or accomplish much of anything for Jesus' sake.

If you feel like the most fake and smarmy Christian, and that you really should be much better at this faith thing by now.

First, take heart. You're in good company. All those first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus were mixed performers, too.

Second, and far more importantly, Easter Sunday is about God's performance, not yours.

Easter Sunday, of all the days of the year, is the day where we joyfully proclaim that in the end, it is all about what God, in Christ, has done for us and for the world.

I close with the words of John Chrysostom, an early church father who served as the archbishop of Constantinople. These words are taken from an Easter Sunday sermon spoken in the fourth century. Many Orthodox churches around the world read this sermon every Easter Sunday:

Christ is Risen, and you, o death, are annihilated!
Christ is Risen, and the evil ones are cast down!
Christ is Risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is Risen, and life is liberated!
Christ is Risen, and the tomb is emptied of its dead.

To Him be Glory and Power forever and ever. Amen!

