

Jesus' Easter Tutorial

Luke 24:36-49

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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I want to begin with a question. Have you ever thought of what the risen Jesus would do if we were the ones writing the story?

Maybe it's a question you've never considered. Maybe you think it's a bit irreverent or misguided, or pointless.

But I think it's worth pondering questions like this from time to time because they highlight important truths. And they can help us to look at familiar texts and stories in new ways.

Sometimes a question like this can remind us of how wildly countercultural Jesus was and is, and they can keep gospel story appropriately strange.

My strong suspicion—based on around five decades of observing human nature and of paying attention to my own inclinations—is that Jesus would do things *very* differently if we were the ones writing the script.

One of the most obvious things I could imagine Jesus doing would be taking revenge.

Against the Romans. Against the Jewish religious authorities. Against all those hurling insults on him as he hung on the cross (“Save yourself if you are who you say you are! What a pathetic excuse for a Messiah!). Against the disciples who abandoned and betrayed him. Against any and all who misunderstood and persecuted and ignored and reviled him.

The resurrection offered decisive vindication of Jesus and his message. Now would be the time to right the wrongs. To expose the injustice and travesty of the whole thing. Payback! No more of this “lamb of God” business. It's time for the “mighty warrior” to step on to the stage. Does not the Bible say, “‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19)?

We might not like to admit it, but I think each one of us at least occasionally longs for a Jesus who acts like this.

On Friday morning, I came across an article on the phenomenon of the “revenge thriller.” These movies are wildly popular, and the reasons are obvious. According to the article:

The appeal of the revenge thriller is simple: it’s catharsis. A grim power fantasy that taps into the irrational parts of our brains that crave satisfaction after being wronged.

That’s why movies powered by revenge hit the way they do. We watch our heroes... lose someone close to them in shocking fashion... They hone their bodies to become weapons, wield a distinctive tool of retribution (be it a sawed-off shotgun, a set of nun chucks, a monstrous axe, etc.), and get to work on felling entire armies that stand between them and bloody satisfaction.¹

Revenge appeals to our most natural human instincts.

Now, we know enough of Jesus to know that he’s not exactly a nun chucks kind of guy. But even if Jesus is not John Wick, he could surely demand vindication and validation of *some* kind. Some decisive and far-reaching display of, “I was right, you all were wrong. Now bow down and grovel!”

Rhetorical, if not physical violence would offer at least *some* kind of catharsis for readers of the story. A victory march in Jerusalem followed by a rousing speech (maybe a stinging rebuke for people like Pilate and Caiaphas). Perhaps the same for Rome?

At the very least, it would be a great way to gain a few more followers, no?

Well, as always, what we want and what we get are very different things. The post-resurrection Jesus does not satisfy our desire for vengeance. He does not offer the kinds of vindication and validation that we might prefer.

The four gospels make this quite plain in their own unique ways.

¹ https://www.avclub.com/best-revenge-thrillers-underrated-hidden-gems-1851375037?utm_source=pocket-newtab-en-us

In Matthew, we get a fairly understated story. Jesus kind of just shows up and tells his disciples to meet him in Galilee where he gives them the Great Commission.

The earliest manuscripts of Mark offer even less. In the oldest versions of Mark's gospel, there *is* no post-resurrection tour. The women simply flee in terror from the empty tomb, not having a clue what it all means. Later manuscripts include little bits of stories that get longer treatments in the other gospels.

In John's gospel, Jesus walks through closed doors and meets his fearful disciples. John is where we find the story of Jesus and doubting Thomas (which is actually the assigned text from the lectionary for this Sunday; I've preached on that one a few times over the years, so I decided to go in a different direction today).

John also contains the memorable story of Jesus having breakfast on the beach after repeating the miracle of the catch of fish from Luke 5. This is followed by the quite moving restoration of Peter who denied him three times.

In all three of these gospels, Jesus' appearances are local, personal (even intimate), highly contained. Only his closest followers see him. His interactions are tender (if occasionally in an exasperated kind of way), prosaic, patient, deliberate.

Rowan Williams puts it well in a sermon called "Building up Ruins":

Where does the risen Jesus appear to his disciples? In the upper room, in Galilee, on a hill, on the seashore—all the diverse and rather muddled stories of what happened after the first Easter seem to point us to the same thing... He meets them where he met them before... And there the risen Jesus comes to bind up the broken-hearted and build up the ruins.²

He meets them where he met them before... This is just so like Jesus, isn't it?

And in all of this, there is, perhaps much to our chagrin, not a hint of revenge. No epic take-down of the political and religious powers. No large-scale public display of righteous vindication.

² Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 77-78.

He goes back to his friends.

It all seems so small, unglamorous, perhaps even unimpressive.

Well, I haven't talked about the gospel of Luke yet. In Luke, Jesus provides two tutorials.

First, we have the well-known Road to Emmaus story, which immediately precedes our text this morning.

The risen Jesus joins his disciples on the road. They don't recognize him. They are still filled with sorrow over the events of the preceding days. *We had hoped that he was the one...*

And then, Jesus says the famous words: "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all the prophets declared..." Don't you see that all of this—the suffering and the glory—was necessary? Don't you see that I am the fulfillment of the whole story?

Even then, incredibly, the disciples seem not to know who is talking to them. They only recognize him when he breaks bread with them a bit further along the journey. After which, he vanished from their sight.

They go back to Jerusalem where Jesus reappears to the larger group of disciples. This is our text today. And the tutorial continues.

He begins with the familiar words. To terrified disciples who thought they were seeing a ghost, he says: "Peace be with you.... Why are you frightened" And why do doubts arise in your hearts?"

He invites them to touch him. He asks for something to eat.

And in doing so, he demonstrates a crucially important point. The risen Jesus is an embodied human being.

It's a *different* kind of body (it can apparently move around and go through walls undetected, it's not obviously recognizable!), but it retains continuity with the old (the scars of the nails, etc.)

We can't really get our heads around this. Somehow, Jesus is both recognizable and not, both physical and spiritual but in new ways. He seems to kind of straddle the old creation and the new creation that is coming in way that we struggle to conceptualize.

But there can be no doubt that he is no ghost, no apparition, no figment of his heartbroken disciples' overeager imaginations.

The first part of the tutorial has to do with the embodied nature of the Christian hope. Jesus did not come back from the dead as a disembodied soul. He came back as a physical human being. And this is the Christian hope for each one of us.

So, Jesus asks for a bit of lunch and moves on with the tutorial. He "opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

Put simply, *everything* finds fulfillment in Jesus.

The entire broad, sweeping narrative from creation and fall to the story of Israel, kings and prophets and poems and shepherds and songs and longing and failure and the hope of swords into plowshares and new creation itself... it is all summed up in Jesus Christ.

The opening words of Hebrews put it like this:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.³ He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word (Hebrews 1:1-3).

So, Jesus sums up the whole show. But what, specifically, about Jesus?

I've talked about what Jesus doesn't do when he comes back from the dead (namely, seek revenge). It's also interesting what Jesus doesn't say here in his tutorial.

He doesn't say, "Now, you see God has vindicated me, so go start a religion and try to bend public morality to my will."

He doesn't say, "Go live out the Sermon on the Mount, get busy transforming the world with social justice initiatives, start working the political levers to bring about the kingdom of God on earth!"

What he says is this:

Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations.

This, according to Jesus, is the message that sums up the law, the prophets, and the psalms. This is what the church is to bear witness to.

Repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus.

Does this mean that public morality and social justice are irrelevant? That we shouldn't be a part of the kingdom coming on earth as in heaven? No, of course not. But this is not where we start.

For Jesus, the point of it all is repentance and the forgiveness of sins. This was why he lived the way he did, why he died the way he did, and why he lives the way he does.

It starts with repentance and with the forgiveness of sins. Everything else flows out of that.

I think it's impossible to overstate the importance of this.

It is God's great levelling device. The call to repentance locates all of humanity in the same boat. There is no one who is righteous, as Paul says in Romans 3:10, quoting one of those old psalms that Jesus is said to have fulfilled.

We fail. We make mistakes. We hurt people and are hurt by them. We blunder foolishly down predictable paths. We forget what needs remembering and remember that which we would do better to forget.

We chase after small and stupid gods and ignore the One who made us, loves us and has called us. And for this, we must repent.

And then, forgiveness. God wipes the record clean. God loves to extend mercy. I love how a well-known prayer from the Church of England begins:

O God, whose nature and property is ever to have mercy and to forgive...

God's nature is to forgive.

A few weeks ago, at the jail during prayer time, there were the usual requests for family and friends, for favourable verdicts, etc.

There was one guy who speaks softly when he speaks at all and struggles with stuttering. When there was a bit of a window of silence, he raised his hand and said that his prayer request was mercy. "I just want a judge or the courts to see that we're more than the bad things we've done, that there's more to us than that."

The one true judge *does* see this. His nature and property is ever to have mercy.

Repentance and the forgiveness of sins is the only way forward, the only way to break cycles of wrongdoing and violence and vengeance and the nursing of grievances and the ways in which we hang on to our pain and failures.

N.T. Wright puts it well:

Today's world is full of disputes, large and small, only a few of which get into the newspapers. Nations, ethnic groups, political factions, tribes and economic alliances struggle for supremacy. Each can tell stories of the atrocities committed by their opponents. Each one claims that they therefore must be allowed redress, revenge, satisfaction.

But as anyone who has studied the complicated history of the Middle East, Rwanda, or Northern Ireland will know, it is simply impossible to give an account of the conflict in which one side is responsible for all the evil and the other side is a completely innocent victim.

The only way forward is the one we all find the hardest at every level: repentance and forgiveness. The resolute application of the gospel, under the

Lordship of the risen Jesus, is the only way forward towards the creation of new hope and possibilities.³

We could apply these words to the domains of marriage and family and friendships and church life. It is not just nations and ethnic groups and political factions that have complicated histories, after all.

The only way forward is often the hardest. But it's also the most hopeful. The resolute application of the gospel, the good news.

Repentance and forgiveness. This is the only way toward the creation of new hope and possibilities in every domain of human life.

This is what the church has borne witness to for two thousand years.

So, to sum up Jesus' Easter tutorial.

The future is physical, embodied, fleshy, earthy. The risen Christ shows up in flesh and blood. He eats a piece of fish. We often say that the Incarnation demonstrates what God thinks of this created world and about human beings. Same goes for the resurrection.

Jesus is the point of the whole story. He sums it up. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.

The church is to bear witness to his good news.

All have access to God.

All can be forgiven.

Salvation and hope are available to all.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



³ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 301-02.