

Isaiah 25:6-9
Matthew 28:1-10
March 23, 2008

God Never Runs Out of Easters

The snowdrops and the crocus have already pushed their way out of the gray ground in our garden. They give me hope that warmer weather is coming. Easter is like that. Butterflies push their way out of cocoon tombs. Their spring beauty is breathtaking. Easter is like that. Easter is early this year; much closer to crocus than to butterflies.

Easter is always the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal or Spring Equinox. Easter is set according to Jewish tradition relating to the Passover and the lunar calendar. The earliest you can have Easter is March 22; the latest April 25. Easter has not been this early in 95 years and Easter won't be this early for at least another 150. So we can safely conclude that this is the earliest any of us will ever experience Easter.

If you relate Easter to crocus, Spring and weather cycles its easy to say that God never runs out of Easters. The thing is Easter is deeper than bulbs re-blooming and more radical than butterflies morphing. Easter might be likened to a spring trickling forth water in

the desert. Yes Easter is like that, or like a pine cone opening and releasing seed only after the devastation of a fire. Yes Easter is like all these things but Easter is more and we Christians have been sloppy about the ways we adopt Hindu Reincarnation, Earth Fertility Cycles, Ancestor Worship and Buddhist Integration without much of a second thought about what we are giving up or losing. We don't seem to trust or even know our own beliefs.

Someone said to Joseph of Arimathea, the man who laid Jesus in the Tomb. "That was such a beautiful, costly hand hewn tomb Joseph. Why did you give it up for someone else's burial? Oh said Joseph, "He only needed it for the weekend." Yes for many Good Friday is a joke, or maybe just a dose of bitter medicine on your way to a guaranteed nirvana like recovery, or maybe just a touch of winter before your spring. But if we haven't been to the tomb, we won't truly recognize Easter.

Easter is meaningless without Good Friday. Easter is beans without the cross. We kind of gloss over the resurrection stories and assume they are about some ticket to heaven or some reincarnation. Easter dawns on an empty tomb and the alleluias are empty as a hollow chocolate bunny, if they have not witnessed the Friday shouts

of “crucify him”, the railing of the thief and the weeping of the women at the cross. Easter is not bypass surgery for the soul. Easter does not deny suffering or death. Although Jesus promises paradise to the other thief from the cross, Easter does not elude the pain we feel when we loose a loved one. Easter recognizes civil war in Kenya, genocide in Darfur, divorces that crumple children, wars in the middle east, oppression in Tibet, hunger in Africa, Asia and America, rape and slavery in the twenty first century. Easter is not reincarnation or escape. Good Fridays are real. Good Friday was real. The nails dug in and the Son cried out "Why have you forsaken me." When we have cried why have you forgotten me God? - Then we are ready for Easter.

Easter does not deny death. Easter conquers death. Easter turns dark Friday death into something dawn bright new. Easter transform lifeless lumps of suffering or void into living breathing hope. Easter fills emptiness with rays of resurrection joy. Easter heals, renews and restores. Good Fridays are numerous but God never runs out of Easters.

It's odd that so many people that sit in church seats are intrigued by the Buddha's inner peace, profess karma, imagine

reincarnation on Hinduism's wheel of Samsara, profess strongly the myth of human progress and our ability to conquer life through bootstraps, sweat, might and science and are like totally blank on the mysteries, hope and promise of our Gospels and Epistles. Then there is a whole other set of Christians who are so empty of hope and trust in God that they think only some small number are getting the good life of heaven, the other billions are damned to a slavery to hopelessness. They limit God's Easter by their own inability to trust in God's immensity and mercy. Won't they be surprised when they meet up with the most of us in paradise and the new creation?

It seems like we Christians read our own scriptures with scant evidence of belief and hope? Some of us place our faith in other options and some of us place our faith in Dante's Inferno. We pray Thine is the Kingdom and the power and the Glory Forever and yet we have trouble trusting it.

If Easter was a gloss over, a pipe dream or a Passover plot, you think that all these conspirators, these Gospel writers would be able to get their act together and agree on a lie? Everyone knows that if you are going to make your case in court, you need an air tight argument based on the historical facts, you need credible witnesses,

you need an illuminating story line and you need to hold out promise or hope. In these regards, the resurrection stories of scripture fall stunningly short.

It is after the Sabbath in the Gospel of Matthew and Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. The one thing all the Gospels agree on is that all the disciples, all the women took the Jewish Sabbath so seriously that they did not go to the tomb until the first day of the week. Mary and Mary bring no funeral spices in Matthew and before they can spy even a rock; there was a great earthquake, an angel rocketing down from heaven rolling back the stone and sitting on it. This earthquake and descending angel are unique to Matthew. On many details of Easter, the Gospels do not agree. I am not going to parse all the Gospel differences on resurrection, but I am going to suggest that the differences in the stories, rather than being understood as proof for a plot, could much better be understood as four different people doing their level best to explain the unexplainable and unexpected to their churches.

I am sure that if we hired and hosted four different professional painters and four different professional writers in church today and asked them to observe and describe; we would get eight beautiful

and unique pictures of our time together and that not every detail would jive. The resurrection stories are faith and art created to describe God's new heaven and new earth breaking in on our Good Fridays – they aren't dispassionate textbooks, computer manuals or insurance reports.

All over the four Gospels the stories of the ministry and mission of Jesus are peppered with quotes and allusions to the Old Testament. The birth stories are a great example. Matthew and Luke extensively tie Jesus' birth to the Prophets. In all four Gospels there is not one Old Testament reference in the Easter stories. We are dealing with mind changing soul shifting fresh material here. We are experiencing God's future breaking in on the present and so there is no reference to the past. Jesus resurrection Body is the first bit of God's new creation coming from God's kingdom and future into ours.¹

The first witnesses to the resurrection in all four Gospels are the women. Remember if you are going to have your day in court, call reliable trustworthy unquestionable witnesses and remember that women in the first century were not permitted to testify in court. In the context of patriarchy and sexism, they were not considered

¹ See NT Wright, *Christians at the Cross*, Word Among Us Press, London 2007 page 77 and *Surprized by Hope* Harper Collins, New York 2008 pp 1-88

credible witnesses. Why in the world did the Gospel writers claim that women were the first witnesses to the angel, to the empty tomb and the risen Christ? They were crucifying their case. And there is really only one plausible reason; because it was true.

Another strange feature of the resurrection stories is the portrait of Jesus himself. The one thing you would kind of expect in the Risen Son, if you trusted in Jewish theology, greek philosophy or Roman pantheism, would be to find his body shining like an illuminating star. Jesus resurrected body in the gospels is physical the women and the disciples touch him, he eats, he uses up the dead body from the tomb and yet he comes in and out rooms without using doors, nothing like this appears on all the pages of scripture, Again we see God's future kingdom breaking into the present with a new and unforeseen reality.

Lastly nowhere in any of the Easter stories do we read of the promise of future Christian hope. Despite a thousand Easter hymns and a million Easter sermons, the resurrection narratives in the gospels never say anything like "Jesus is raised, therefore there is life after death or Jesus is raised so you get a ticket to heaven." ²

² Ibid Wright

Why if the gospels are a plot to convince people of a lie, don't they hold out the promise that Paul raises thirty years later when he writes his Epistles; that we have a ticket to heaven. Why doesn't Jesus say to everyone, you can chill I have been to paradise with the thief – all is well? Two possible reasons are that these stories although edited later, were already safe in oral tradition before Paul wrote about future hope. And secondly the Main point of the Resurrection is this Christ has Risen, Jesus is raised, so God's new creation has begun and we his followers are commissioned to carry out ministry. God's future and God's new creation broke into the present with the resurrection of Jesus and we as Christian are commissioned by Jesus to continue working on this new creation which God has revealed in the Risen Christ.

Often if you look around our church on a Sunday Morning you will see groups of high school students and sometimes middle school student sitting together in fellowship. Gertrude Corkan of First Presbyterian Church of Portage Indiana was sitting with a group of older women in church one Sunday as is their practice. She reports in the magazine Presbyterians Today that Sometimes their pastor and music director like to change things around in worship and on

one morning the Pastor announced we will now sing hymn number 324, "Open My Eyes that I may See." The Lady sitting next to her who was a spry one in her nineties leaned over to the person on the other side and said in a rather discernable voice. That's the song I want played at my funeral."³ It caused quite a bit of laughter among those sitting close by, disturbed the service, but revealed an unfrozen hope in the promise that God never runs out of Easters. This Presbyterian woman in her nineties, in a way, was just like the two Mary's who hurried off to tell the disciples that they had seen Jesus. Having met Christ in her life as a Christian, she was in hope ready God's new creation which comes after death.

"Empty tombs aren't a lot to go on I know. Easter is not much of a blockbuster is it, the way the Gospel writers share it. There are other more dramatic tales and of course that's the power of it. It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. If the Gospel writers wanted to tell Easter in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster; but what we pretty much get is a simple telling of the way it was. Something

³. Laugh Lines, page 3, in Presbyterians Today, March 1995, P.C.U.S.A.

unimaginable happened of that there is no doubt. Its simplicity is Amazing.”⁴

If you go home this morning (or afternoon) and you break out your Bibles and you read the resurrection stories from scripture, it will become abundantly clear that Easter is not the end of Lent. Easter is not the last Sunday on the church calendar; even though the gods of spring sports and outdoor recreation sing their sirens. Easter is not an annual holiday or some Christian Memorial day. Easter is a commissioning. God never runs out of Easters because God reaches into God’s hope filled future and brings it back for us on every Sunday. Easter is the sending out of God’s disciples into the world to work for thy kingdom come. Easter is an ordination. The followers of Jesus are blessed and sent forth to share the good news, create beauty and establish fairness and Justice in the world. Easter is a beginning. Easter is the start of God’s new creation that comes after paradise. Easter is God’s charge to go out conquer the Good Fridays that are all over our world.

Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed

⁴ See Frederick Buechner on Easter in *Whistling in the Dark*, Harper and Row 1988 page 41