

Easter is not good news without the cross

The shock of Easter isn't just the empty grave. It's that God comes back from death and doesn't condemn the unrighteous ones who put him there.

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It's vogue in the mainline Christian tribe to insist that the gospel is really all about the resurrection, not the cross. I had umpteen emails say just that after my Easter sermon this year.

Never mind that St. Paul, in his rundown of the gospel *kerygma* in 1 Corinthians 15, inextricably links cross *and* burial *and* resurrection. What reveals resurrection alone

to be deficient as gospel is the one feature common to all the Gospels' Easter narratives. Mark and Matthew, Luke and John, the Gospels all agree: the very first reaction to news of the resurrection is fear.

The soldiers guarding the tomb faint from *fear*. The women, come to anoint the body, run away. *Terrified*. The disciples lock the door and *cower* in the corner.

The first response to the news "Christ is risen" is not "He is risen indeed!" It's panic. Fear. Terror.

The word *resurrection* itself makes them white-knuckle afraid. That word is enough to provoke not just awe but frightened shock. Before you get to the New Testament, the only verse in the Old that explicitly anticipates resurrection is in Daniel 12. Not only was Daniel the last book added to the Hebrew Bible, it was the most popular scripture during the disciples' day.

For their entire history up until Daniel's time, the Jews had absolutely no concept of heaven. When you died, you were dead. That was it, the Jews believed. You worshipped and obeyed God not for hope of heaven but because God, in and of God's self, was worthy of our thanks and praise.

But then, when Israel's life turned dark and grim, when their Temple was razed and set ablaze, when their Promised Land was divided and conquered, and when they were carted off as exiles to a foreign land, the Jews began to long for a Day of God's justice and judgement.

If not in this life, then in a life to come. And so the resurrection the prophet Daniel foresees is a *double* resurrection. Those who have remained righteous and faithful in the face of suffering will be raised up by God to life with God. But for those who've caused suffering, they might be on top now in this life but one day God will raise them up too, not to everlasting life but to everlasting shame and punishment.

So, in the only Bible those disciples knew, that word *resurrection* was a double-edged sword. Resurrection was about the justice owed to the suffering and the judgment that belonged to God.

In the disciples' Bible, if you were long-suffering, resurrection was good news. If you were good. If you weren't, resurrection was hellfire and damnation.

You can imagine, then, how those disciples heard that first Easter message. If God had raised Jesus from the dead—Jesus who was the only Righteous One, the only Faithful One, as St. Paul says—then that must mean God was about to judge the living and the dead.

The disciples are afraid of the Easter news not because they fail to understand resurrection but because they *do* understand.

They know their scripture, and they know they've abandoned Jesus. They've denied ever knowing him. They've turned tail, turned a blind eye, washed their hands of his blood. They've scapegoated him into suffering, and stood silently by while others mocked him and taunted him. They've let the world sin all its sins into him and then left him forsaken on a cross. For sinners like them, resurrection could only mean one thing: brimstone.

What's so surprising about the Easter news isn't just that the tomb is empty but that hell is empty too. It's *shocking* that the risen Christ doesn't encounter his disciples and indict them:

I was naked and you were not there to clothe me.

I was thirsty and you were too long gone to give me something to drink.

I was a prisoner and you stood in the crowd pretending to know me not.

I was hungry for justice, wretched upon the cross, and I remained a stranger to you.

The shock of Easter isn't just the empty grave. It's that God comes back from death and doesn't condemn the unrighteous ones who put him there. All of them, while they were yet sinners. God comes back from the death they'd consigned him to and he doesn't pay them the wages their sin had earned. He forgives their sin. He spares them the everlasting judgment and shame they had every reason from their Bibles to expect. What should've been terrifying news becomes good news.

So then, the Easter expectation given to us by Daniel brings us back to the necessity of Paul's gospel in 1 Corinthians 15, where Christ's return from the grave is linked inextricably with his death for our sins. If Paul is wrong, and Christ did not die for our sins (in accordance with the scriptures), then the disciples are right to run away in fright.

That the crucified one is alive again is not good news unless it's true he was crucified for ungodly us. Neither is it good news that Jesus, whom we crucified, is Lord *unless* we know by his bleeding and dying that he's *for* us.

Those who want to focus on the empty tomb as the good news to the exclusion of the cross actually have it backwards. Only the latter makes the former gospel.

Without Good Friday, on Easter we should all make like the eggs and hide.

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