

The Good News and Bad News of Discipleship

Matthew 28:1-15

The Cost of Discipleship: Exploring Hard Sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew

Dr. Gareth W. Icenogle

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Easter - worship at 8:30, 10 and 11:30 a.m.

Easter is a day when it makes sense that the extravagance of artistry is demonstrated. We hear beautifully from our musicians and our technicians; we see beautifully from our flower committee, who take many, many hours of planning and preparation, design and installation, to develop the wonderful garden scenes that we have here today. I want to say “thank you” to the musicians, the flower artists, and the technicians who make this worship moment a moment of celebration.

Why talk about discipleship and mention bad news on a day when we're supposed to be talking about the resurrection and good news? Today is all about the resurrection, isn't it? Why is it not enough to say that God raised Jesus the Christ from the dead? The tomb is empty, there's no one there in the grave; he is not here. He was crucified, but he is risen. Take a good look, and soak it in. Experience the angel's words and see the resurrected Jesus. Let us worship him. Let us pray.

Now, Spirit of God, Spirit of the resurrected Christ, help us to hear the power of your resurrection. And give us the courage to put our worship into witness, and our listening into action. Through Jesus Christ, the one whom you raised from the dead. Amen.

There is worship at the tomb. The encounter is significant with the angel and with Jesus himself—the presence of the resurrected Christ. And when they grab hold of Jesus, they worship him. But the story does not end there. Worship is not enough. There is something else to be done; it is the beginning, but not the ending. It is the foundation, but not the building. It is the message, but not the mission. It is the declaration, but it is not the discipleship. The event, the good event, is not Good News until someone shares it. Worship must lead to witness.

Once the angel said that Jesus was not in the tomb, the angel invited the people to come and take a good look for themselves. “Come and see.” But immediately thereafter, the angel said, “But go and tell the disciples. He is going ahead of you, and you will see him as you go.” You will not see Jesus if you stay here. The resurrection power and presence of Jesus is on the way to tell the story. While they were running out on the mission, Jesus suddenly and surprisingly shows up. How many times in scripture do we see that, while people are on the way, Jesus shows up?

The power of the resurrection is most visible when we are on the way to share the Good News with someone else. Faith without action is dead. Easter—without the movement of sharing the Good News—is not worth very much. ‘Don't send somebody else,’ the angel said, ‘You go and share.’ Even to the women who probably were not considered the best witnesses of their time. ‘You've experienced the transcendent power of God; you go and tell the story.’ As tough as it is in this world, you share your experience of God.

My parents shared their experience of God as I grew up. I am here today because they influenced me, from my infancy, to bring me to worship. I can still remember my earliest experience of worship: hearing the Hallelujah Chorus on Easter Sunday morning, as a two- or three-year-old. They lived it and they spoke it, at home and at work. My dad would often make a point of saying, “We put our money where our witness is.” And he would take his check and put it in the offering.

However, the witness of Jesus Christ and the power of the resurrection is a struggle. Rabbi Abraham Jacob Heschel, a great rabbinical scholar, said this about the struggle: “God did not make it easy for us to have faith in him, or to remain faithful to him. The facts that deny the divine are mighty indeed. The arguments of agnosticism are eloquent. The events that defy him are spectacular. There are no final proofs for the existence of God. There are only witnesses.”

If you look to a person to convince you by scientific proof that God exists...that the resurrection happened...you will be miserable. We have even seen recently, in the life of Elizabeth Edwards—John Edwards's spouse—the recognition that she has cancer for the second time, and the struggle that she has, particularly reflecting back on her experience of God, in the death of her 16-year-old son, eleven years ago. "I had to think about a God who would not save my son. He was a gentle and good boy – you'd think that if God was going to protect somebody, he'd protect that boy. But not only did God not protect him, the wind blew him right off the road. It was as if God himself had blown him off the road. I had to think about: What kind of God do I have that does not intervene for my child? And I learned to accept that God does not provide us protection and resurrection in this life, but the promise of salvation in the next."

Some witnesses struggle with the message of the resurrection. And I'm sure you do today. That's why we're here—to experience again the moment and celebration: Is it real? And it is, by faith.

Some witnesses are not good witnesses. Some witnesses in the church make mistakes and don't tell the story well. In 1985, I was Pastor for Small Group Ministry at the Highland Park Presbyterian Church in Dallas, Texas. While praying, a small group had an ecstatic prophesy that was rather unique and strange. They heard a prophetic proclamation that this group would leave the room in which they were gathered in the church, they would go out and lay hands on a statue of a lamb in the garden outside. That statue of the lamb would bleed, and the sins of the whole church would be healed. What kind of a witness is that? They proceeded to go out and do it—laying hands on that lamb. If you want to know what that lamb looks like, it's in the garden in the back of our narthex today, because the sculptress who designed it is a member of this church. It's a wonderful statue of a lamb—the lamb of God. But they had a bad witness about the purpose of that lamb in the garden. Jesus had already died for them.

Something else is happening in this story besides the resurrection and the wonderful witness of the women going to tell the disciples. There's another group that is on a mission at the same time; it's a counter-mission. It's the guards who saw the angel and felt the earthquake, who saw the rolling stone. They were struck dumb, as if dead. It was as if they'd been to a Rolling Stones concert themselves – stoned out of their minds. Well, maybe they'd been smoking that white stuff instead of seeing it. The guards had shaken so much with fear that they O.D.'d on their anxiety. They became like 'deadheads;' and they weren't grateful ones, either. The guards were on a mission to tell their side of the story. And their side of the story was: something happened; we don't know what.

But they didn't go tell the good news to those they were concerned about. They went and told the ones who had killed Jesus...who had planned his arrest...who would not tolerate his message...who had framed him for false witnesses...who had conspired with Judas. They told people who wanted to create the wrong news and the bad news. Even while the women were on their mission to declare the Good News, the terrified guards were on their counter-mission to discover and declare bad news. After all, their lives were on the line with their boss, the governor. What would he say when he discovered they'd let the body go? "We'd better do something about this to protect ourselves." And what we discover is that, for every mission to proclaim Jesus, there is a mission to disdain Jesus. For every witness to the resurrection, there is a witness to debate the resurrection as a hoax. For every act of discipleship to carry the Good News, there are acts of deception, delusion, and disruption that bring bad news to the world. Matthew observed this clearly in the resurrection text: while there's a mission of Good News, there is a counter-mission of bad news.

Recently I was looking through some radical Islamic information; quoting the Quran, and what the Quran has to say about resurrection: "And they said in boast, 'We killed Christ, Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of God.' But they killed him not, or crucified him; but it was made to appear to them so. And those who differ there are full of doubts, with no certain knowledge; but they follow only conjecture; for of a surety, they did not kill Jesus."

If Jesus is not killed, then Jesus is not raised from the dead. For every statement of Good News in the world, there are bound to be people who declare it a hoax. There's a new vogue of neo-atheism in this country. Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins are examples of that – Harris has said, in his recent book, "Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one. If you believe in the

resurrection, and you look to the resurrection with hope, you will neglect this life and your responsibility.” Bad news. Bad news attempts to usurp the Good News.

There were two people who came to join the church in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, when I was pastoring. The man and wife had left their last church. I asked them what happened, and they said, “Well, the pastor didn't treat us very well there, so we left. We're here now. Pastor, we know that you'll treat us better.” I began to be concerned. After a few weeks, the man said, “I'd like to take you to lunch. I have something to talk with you about.” I said, “O.K.” At lunch he said this to me: “Pastor, I've had an experience that validates reincarnation, so I know what Jesus meant by resurrection. It was really reincarnation. Do you mind if I teach a class about reincarnation in this church?” I said, “No. I don't want you to do that.” And they stopped coming. I'm sure they said to the next pastor, “That last pastor treated us poorly.”

For the Good News, there are always people who proclaim the wrong news. A new-age author, Acharya S, said in her book, *The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, “Most of the life of Jesus is myth, created by disciples in the church who have power, money, and control over other people.” There's a struggle that goes on between the resurrection power of Jesus and those who resist that power. A recent *Wall Street Journal* cartoon was a reflection that, even those who have a different view struggle in their own sense of witness: a new-age monk is lying on a psychiatrist's couch in the office and staring up at the ceiling, speaking about his trouble in life. He says, “The problem is that, even though I'm one with the universe, the universe is nuts.”

Even people who don't believe in the resurrection struggle with their message. We live in a world that has always struggled with the historic fact of the resurrection. Some undermine it; some avoid it; some deny it; some ignore it; some even abuse it. But the followers of Jesus—those of us gathered here today—have always had to live and proclaim in a world where people don't believe what we might say about Jesus Christ and his resurrection. And why? Because they can't control the thinking and action of other people who do not fear death. And why? Because they cannot compete with the grace and compassion of people who love one another and will not be coerced, threatened, or intimidated.

While we live in a world of cheap belief—even in the resurrection: people who show up for church only on Christmas and Easter—we must affirm today that resurrection is an expensive gift. It cost Jesus his life; and not just his life, but a criminal's death on a cross. You can believe an alternate story, but that's not what today is about. Hype about the resurrection and just having the celebration is not enough; it doesn't help us to live out the hope of the resurrection in a world that wants to hide it. We must lay hold, in the core and gut of our being, that Jesus Christ is risen—and do something about it.

Why a sermon about discipleship on Easter? So that we will go and try not to stay at the empty tomb with the angel. So that we will go out into a world that is full of alternate news, and even bad news. So that we will go, and not let fear stop us, nor shut us up, nor shut us down. So that we will go with the resurrected Jesus, and go before others to tell the story. So that we will go with a purpose and a message; and go, knowing that, wherever the resurrection story is proclaimed, there will be people who resist.

How can you be a witness for God today if you have not met the risen Christ yourself? Ask the risen Christ to appear to you, to become real to you, so that this day has personal meaning for you. And then, you have the power to tell others. Yes, Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. So it's time for us to rise up and go out into a world that is hungry to know God—but is also confused, conflicted, and competitive, with many other messages of life's meaning. Particularly today, there are many voices out there. It is time for the voice of those who believe Jesus Christ is risen to speak up, speak well, and speak assertively. Amen.

Let us pray. May you give us the courage to ask for you to come to us so that we might know you in the power of the resurrection, Lord Jesus Christ. Give us the freedom to go out and proclaim, as witnesses of that experience, in a world that is hungry to know the message. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.