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The National Presbyterian Church

A Sight for Sore Eyes

Luke 24:13-47

David A. Renwick

The resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ on that first Easter Sunday was a miracle. Make no mistake about it. It was not merely metaphor as John Updike points out in his “Seven Stanzas at Easter”: Listen to stanzas one and four:

Make no mistake: if he rose at all

It was as His body;

If the cell’s dissolution did not reverse, the molecules

reknit, the amino acids rekindle,

the Church will fall.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,

analogy, sidestepping, transcendence,

making of the event a parable,

a sign painted in the faded

credulity of earlier ages:

let us walk through the door.

From ‘Telephone Poles and Other Poems’ © 1961 by John Updike.

Let us not mock God with metaphor! It was “miracle”: Jesus alive in human flesh. Jesus the Son of God, Jesus unjustly condemned to suffer on a cross. Jesus hung up on that cross, dies upon that cross, is taken down from the cross, and his body is laid in a tomb. A stone is rolled over the entrance to the tomb and Jesus’ body remains there on the Friday night and on through Saturday night. And then on the Sunday morning, when women come to the tomb the stone is rolled away. They look inside. It is empty, except for the cloths in which his body was wrapped. Those cloths remain there and then people begin to see him – one or two at a time, and then many at a time.

The Apostle Paul, writing some 20 years later to the church in the city of Corinth in Greece, says that on one occasion there were 500 people who saw him at one time, most of whom are still alive, as if to say, “if you don’t believe me, go and check this out, they are still here and you can meet them, and you can hear their story” (1 Corinthians 15:6). No hallucination: 500 at one time.

Make no mistake about it. The resurrection on that first Easter Sunday morning was a miracle. Not the only miracle that is told to us in the pages of scripture: there are many. But I would suggest to you that it is one of three foundational miracles that are part and parcel of the

scripture, part and parcel of our understanding as Christians, of this world in which we live. And all of them are tied together.

1. THE MIRACLE OF CREATION. The first of these foundational miracles is the miracle of creation – the fact that something exists rather than nothing, and that you and I exist and are here today. As Christians we believe that this is by the will of Almighty God who exists outside of creation and before creation, yet who chose on purpose to create, to give life, and in particular, to give life to you and me – with power and wisdom and purpose and intention, to give life to you and me.

Because there is a Creator God we know that we are not here by accident, but here on purpose. Some people, when they look at the creation stories in the Bible get focused on what I think are the wrong questions. Good questions, but the wrong questions in terms of the intent of scripture: how did God do it? how long did it take?

Somebody has to ask those questions but when the scripture relates the story of creation it is not to answer those questions. It is to remind us that we are not alone in the universe; our lives are not merely an accident. We are not here by chance but by the will of another, whose knowledge and power is greater than anything we have as yet discovered.

Sometimes we give to scientists an inordinate sense of their power as if they were the creators of the laws that they discover – the laws of physics or chemistry or biochemistry or whatever it may be. But as Einstein said (or at least it was attributed to him!): All we ever do as scientists is to “think God’s thoughts after God,” to find out what God already knows and what God himself designed. It is God who stands above the universe who can do whatever God chooses, and if God so chooses to raise someone from the dead, who are we to say this could not happen?

The universe more and more these days is understood as being filled with mystery. Even scientists, astrophysicists, would agree with this – creating in their minds aspects of the universe that we do not as yet see, to explain what we do see.

If we were to go back a hundred years or so ago I would suggest to you that if I were to show the cell phone that I have just taken out of my pocket to somebody, and say to them “You know, with this little thing I can speak to anyone around the world. I can send them a photograph of myself. I can find out about all kinds of things in which I am interested, just with this” – they would laugh; they would say this is inconceivable, absolutely impossible. I look forward to the day when God says clearly about some things that seems to us to be inconceivable or impossible, “Oh that. That was easy!” Occurring perhaps in the majority of occasions by some law of nature that we have as yet not discovered.

But this is the God in whom we believe and this miracle stands at the foundation of all of life: that we live our lives in a sphere created by one who stands outside the creation: the creator God who, and this is the second miracle, chooses not to stand

aloof from the creation or apart from the creation as if God were a disinterested observer but to enter this creation, in particular in the incarnation, in the birth of the son our Lord Jesus Christ taking on human flesh to live amongst us within the world that God has made.

2. THE MIRACLE OF THE INCARNATION. If we think about the creation in terms of God being a movie maker, God is both the director and the producer of the movie, standing, as it were, on the outside. The miracle of the incarnation is God's decision to be inside his own movie. Not merely to be in the credits before or after, but to be an actor, to be a player on the inside. And God does this in part to tell us that we are not alone and that we are not our own. He has come to be close to us and to claim us as his own. God is "on the outside" – great beyond all our knowing. But God is also "on the inside," filled with love, coming to seek us out.

God does so, though, not merely to let us know that he is close, but God comes to us, enters the movie of life, the drama of life, in order to fulfill a mission on your behalf and mine; a difficult and a dark mission – he comes to fight against the power of evil and to win. To be sure, we cannot always explain the power of evil and its relationship to a good and all powerful God. Theologians and philosophers have spent much time trying to explain the power of evil; and there are certainly times to try do that. But what we know is this: that there is evil in this world. We know it from history. We also know it in ourselves. We know personally that tussle which the Apostle Paul speaks about in Romans 7 between "*the good that I would do that I do not do and that which I would not do but I do.*" We know that tussle within us which separates us from God. And God who is separate from the world says: "I will not remain separate; I made it; I will enter it comes to fulfill a mission in which my intent is to destroy evil and its power and impact."

Have you ever wondered why what I might call "salvation movies" are so popular in the world? And why we return to them again and again, though in some senses the story is always the same; the details are different but the story is always the same. Three of those movies come to mind that have been shown in theaters relatively recently.

- We've got Harry Potter coming to save the world from evil: a savior saving the world.
- We have Bilbo Baggins coming to save the world in *The Lord of the Rings* along with others: a salvation story.
- And we have Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games*, fighting against the Capitol.

And no doubt there are countless others. And we may say to ourselves "Oh that's interesting, isn't the story of Jesus rather like those movies?" To which I would respond by saying, "Sort of, but no! You've got it back to front." The foundational story, the foundational drama on which the others are based, is in fact the real-life drama of the Creator God who enters the world in the person of Jesus to be close to us, to show us his love, but also to deliver us from the power of

evil; and after that original drama all of these other dramas take their place as miniature variations of the greater story.

Indeed, the miracle at the center of the original story is more amazing than any of the others, because of the way in which the creator God in the incarnation decides to deal with evil – not with spears, not with swords, not with bullets, not with tanks, not with weapons, but with the offering up of the life of one (reflected in the Hunger Games?) who is fully obedient to the point of death, who submits to God, and submits even to evil! So that evil succeeds in doing its worst, driving him to the cross, even to the point where evil says “I win! I win! He dies! I killed him!” But then there’s the third miracle. The miracle of the resurrection where God says “*No you don’t. You can do everything to win but I have the final word. The final word is mine!*”

3. THE MIRACLE OF THE RESURRECTION. Without the resurrection, of course, the incarnation would seem to end with a whimper. Indeed it would! Without the resurrection, the death of Jesus on the cross is defeat. But *with* the resurrection it becomes the most remarkable moment in which evil does its worst and God “takes that evil on” and overcomes it for you and me, and says to us,

“Now you know, there is no place where you can be where God will not go too; there is no evil that can occur that God will not deal with; there is nothing that can separate you from the love of God made known in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:35-39).”

It’s the miracle of the resurrection which says that’s what happened in that terrible moment, salvation for you and me. I believe in the Resurrection!

I believe in the Resurrection, first of all, I suppose because I believe in the miracle of creation that the God who made us can in fact do whatever God wants with the creation that he made. But I believe in the resurrection as well because of what we might call “the simplicity and the unembellished nature of the Resurrection stories in the pages of scripture.”

We might well expect when people told the stories of Jesus’ resurrection that the stories would grow and grow and grow and that those humble people who saw Jesus alive would all of a sudden become portrayed as perfect saints in the pages of scripture – after all, they were the first ones to see Jesus alive again: how faithful, how powerful they must have been, how glorious and righteous. But the fact of the matter is this: that when those stories are told in the scripture (and we heard some of them this morning) they are unembellished. The ones who see Jesus alive are people with sore eyes who are weeping and crying because they believe that he is dead, and their human weakness and fallibility is written into the stories – not pushed aside, but there for all to see. When I think of it, if we were writing the stories to impress the world, we might have left out some of those personal weaknesses!

- So we find for example the women who come to the tomb on that Easter Sunday morning, they come with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. This seems rather nice and holy but it’s very important to remember just exactly what they were doing. The spices aren’t just a nice way of taking care of Jesus; they are a nice way of making sure that the tomb in which a dead

body is placed does not smell thereafter! The purpose of the tomb was to provide a place where a body could decompose. All that would be left would be bones; and those bones would be placed in an ossuary, a box designed for bones. And then that tomb would be used for somebody else. And the spices were there to make sure that that place would be fit for another – because somebody had really died, and their body was really decomposing, and those women really believed that that was happening to Jesus. They did not come believing that Jesus would be alive. They did not arrive at the tomb saying “we know he’s not going to be here. We believe with all our heart.” No! They came to anoint a body that was dead and decaying. But they left with another story.

- Or think about those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, a town a few miles outside Jerusalem. What were they doing on that Easter Sunday? Well they were almost certainly going home! I mean, it was all over. They had come to Jerusalem to be with Jesus whom they thought was the one who was going to deliver their nation and the world from oppression. Instead the oppression wins, and he dies on the cross; and it’s all over and they’re going home, they’re leaving town, they’re walking on their way – and the scripture says they are sad, they have sore eyes. And they are talking about their troubles and sadness when a stranger walks up to them whom they do not recognize. *We*, as gospel readers, know it’s Jesus, but *they* don’t recognize Jesus. And why? Well, because they weren’t looking for Jesus!! And even if he looked like Jesus they did not even conceive it to be possible that he was alive. And so he asks them what they are talking about. And I wish we could see the faces of both of them, but I think it’s Cleopas who answers first of all who turns to Jesus as if to say: “*Excuse me? You don’t know? Where have you been? What rock did you climb out from being under? Were you in Jerusalem and you have not heard about this Jesus, this great prophet who was crucified and so many of us had placed our hopes on him and now it’s all gone? Didn’t you check Facebook? Read your text?*” They were not expecting to meet Jesus. They believed he was dead and everything in their body language and demeanor, and in their lives said so.

Perhaps you can imagine the story being told 10, 15, 20 years later. And Cleopas tells the story. He doesn’t say “When Jesus came up to us, at that very moment when he arrived, we had such great faith that we knew who it was!” You and I might well have written the story like that, just to clear some things up and to escape looking bad. But when Cleopas tells the story, it’s as if he says “*You know, that was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life! This is the risen Jesus and I tell him in effect that he’s an idiot! (says I: ‘Where have you been’?!)*” No! This is part of a human story with human actors, ordinary people in it.

- And the ordinariness of it translates over to the disciples of Jesus, the closest ones to him, who had been with him throughout his ministry, who, when the women come to tell them that the tomb is empty, believe (and this is what the scripture says) that this was an “idle tale.” If I were writing the story later, about me, I’d have left that one out. I’d have said, “I knew it. I knew it from the very first moment. I believed it before you believed it!” But these

pillars of the church, these first bishops as it were of the church, these princes of the church, were ordinary people who found the resurrection hard to believe. So when Jesus appears before them even then they don't say "Ah, here you are at last. They think it's a ghost (Luke 24:27)! And later on, as with those two in the road to Emmaus no doubt when the story was told and somebody says what was it like? They reply, not with a halo on their heads, nor with great faith, but they say "How foolish we were. We just didn't believe it. We thought it was a ghost. We had no clue what God could or would do!"

The Resurrection, this great miracle confirms the power of the incarnation that God is not only with us but God came on a mission to destroy evil and that his death was not the end but it was indeed the very means by which evil would be destroyed. The devil did his worst but was not powerful enough to conquer God, the God who is our creator, who stands above all in wisdom and power and might.

Three great miracles (Creation, Incarnation, Resurrection), linked together at the foundation of the whole of the Biblical story but they are incomplete without one more miracle and that's a miracle that the Holy Spirit wants to work within your life and my life. All of these things are true but until they become "true for us" something is missing. They cannot become "true for us" until God, rather like the stone in front of the tomb and its entrance, until God opens up our hearts and gives to us a glimpse to begin with and then full vision of the fact that *here are truths on which our lives can be based*: a solid rock on which life can be lived now and forever.

Our secular world tells us another story, many other stories, but this story is a story on which our lives can be based now and for eternity. The risen Jesus comes to us today as he has done to those who have heard this story from generation to generation and he says, "Behold I stand at the door and knock" (Revelation 3:20): the door is the door of your heart and mind, the door of our hands and our feet, the door of our lives. And he knocks and he says

"Ordinary people, something extraordinary has happened. I am not dead but I am alive and as I came to those disciples on that first Easter so I want to come to you – not to live "out there," but incarnationally "in here" with you. Will you open the door? Will you ask for God's power to open the door that I may come in? And in coming in he says to us as well "You'll never regret it: I will never fail you or forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

These are the promises of our risen Lord Jesus.

They come to us from our creator God.

They come to us from our God who humbles himself to enter our universe in the incarnation.

They come to us from the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

On such promises your life and mine can utterly depend. This God keeps his promise.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800