

April 8, 2007

Easter – Making Room for the Agnostic and the Skeptic

Mark 9:14-29 / John 20:1-18 / John 20:24-29

Almost 23 years ago now, in May of 1979 I quit my job as a mechanical engineer, bought a backpack, some supplies, a plane ticket, a Britrail and Eurail Pass, and set out on a three and a half month trek around Europe.

And I'll never forget one particular evening, about one month into my trip. I had left London, gone to Stonehenge and then headed north to the Lake District of England.

I got off the train, made my way to the Youth Hostel at the far end of Lake Windemere, checked in, put my gear in my room, and with some light remaining, climbed a large hill, where I sat and watched the sunset and the lights start to go on in all the cottages around the lake as the darkness settled in. It was soooo beautiful!

I stayed a while soaking it all in before I made my descent, only to find that the Youth Hostel had been invaded by a couple busloads of elementary or Jr. high students on holiday from Halifax. And the room I had chosen because it was secluded and out of the way was now the quarters for 7 very rambunctious and noisy fifth and sixth grade boys who, upon learning I was from Boston, made me say words like, "Harvard," "hearts," "water," and "park the car," which got them all rolling on the floor laughing!

Some tried their karate moves on me, and others just watched laughing, but needless to say, I realized I'd get no quiet time in that room! So I grabbed my little Gideon's Pocket New Testament and headed down to the sitting room for some peace and quiet, found a comfortable couch, settled in and began to read Matthew's Gospel.

 Anyway, about 10-15 minutes into reading, I saw two small feet standing right in front of me and facing me. So I looked up, and there in front of me was a little girl (I'm guessing about 10-11 years old) – long sandy blonde hair, standing and staring directly at my neck! So, somewhat instinctively I looked around to see if there was someone else behind me that she was looking at, but there wasn't. Just me — or rather, my neck! (Now I need to tell you that just before I left for Europe, I went out and bought a beautiful polished silver cross necklace which had the words "He Lives" attached to the bottom—actually it was all one molded, polished piece.)

So, I set my New Testament on the seat next to me and looking down at the cross said, "You like it don't you." She nodded affirmingly, sat down next to me on the couch.

Still looking at the cross she said: *"Who Lives?"* "Jesus," I said. *"After He died on the cross for our sins, He rose again from the dead, and He's still alive today."* To which she responded, *"Do you really believe that?"* "Yes," I said, *"that's why I wear the cross, because I want people to know He lives."* Then with a sigh of confusion, she said these words to me: *"My daddy told me it's all make-believe. He says its all fairy tales and legends, just like the Easter bunny."*

And just as I started to respond by telling her it really was true, and really did happen, a young man in his early to mid-twenties (whom I assume was either a teacher or a chaperone and had been sitting on a chair to our left listening to our whole conversation), stood up, walked over, gave me a look of absolute disgust, took the little girl by the arm, and whisked her out of the room.

I sat there for about 20 minutes (somewhat stunned and a little upset) trying to figure out what I'd done that was so offensive, when all of a sudden, another little girl (a brown haired girl) about the same age, tip-toed up to me, looked around to make sure no one was looking, and said: *"My...my friend wants to know if you can sit with her tomorrow at breakfast."* And then with a grin that ran from ear to ear she added, *"She thinks you're an angel sent from God."*

Now, I have to tell you that up till that point in my life I'd been called a lot of things (ugly, insensitive, a drunk, thief, jerk, snob, idiot etc.) but "angel" wasn't one of them! In fact, I had to chuckle too!

And although I did take her invitation seriously, and wanted to accept, I thought about the angered reaction of the chaperone, the fact that the other girl had to sneak out of her room just to come talk to me (as if I was some sort of criminal !), I figured it would be best not to risk another altercation in the morning. So, at 4:30 a.m., while it was still dark, I woke, quietly got dressed, put on my backpack, and slipped out of the hostel before anyone else was even up.

I don't know the girls name (I didn't enter it in my diary), I never saw her again, but I'm convinced that our chance meeting wasn't merely a chance meeting! I believe God, by His sovereign and providential grace put me there in that place when she was there in that place, because He wanted me to plant a seed in that little girls heart. And I also trust that in the intervening years He has also providentially led someone else to water that seed, that she came to faith in Jesus, and that some day I'll meet her — either here or in heaven, or both!
(She'd be about 37 years old right now!)

And I share that story with you, not only because it's true (!), but because it shows such a vast divergence of opinion and belief about the resurrection of Jesus among such a small cross-section of people:

There was that little girl's DAD who was obviously an outspoken unbeliever — an avid evangelist for unbelief, we could say, and possibly an atheist / there was the CHAPERONE who was antagonistic toward Christian belief (or at least Christians who try to impress their beliefs upon others) / there was that LITTLE GIRL HERSELF, who was encouraged not to believe, but seemed to want to believe, even in the face of her dad's attempts to keep her from believing / there was that LITTLE GIRL'S FRIEND who was caught in the middle like a secret spy and thought it was all pretty funny! / And then there was ME — who seemed so confident in my beliefs, but in actuality, was in the final phases of struggling to believe.

(I was what I call a "gonner"— a person whom the Hound of Heaven was bearing down hard upon their heels. One who could hear the incessant pounding of "His majestic feet," as Francis Thompson put it, "following closely, closely after." One who knew God had my number (so to speak) and that I was destined (or to use the biblical term "pre-destined") for eternal life!

It's true. I was not converted (that is, I did not actually come to faith in Christ) until 6 months later, on January 7 of 1980. But in those months leading up to my conversion I remember so wanting to believe, and being so convinced I would eventually believe, that I actually went out and bought that cross as a token of faith in the fact that God would eventually bring me to faith!!!

It wasn't until years later, when I was reading the great Puritan Richard Sibbes, that I came across a statement I had never considered before. He wrote, "The desire to believe is itself an act of faith" (faith in its conceptual or formative stages). But my point is this: ***We often look at the Easter Story and forget the most prominent aspect of it aside from the fact that it happened — the fact that at first NO ONE believed it! That coming to faith was a gradual process!***

Thomas often takes the rap as the "doubter" who wouldn't believe until or unless he was able to put his hands in the wounds of Jesus resurrected body. It's even become his nickname — "Doubting Thomas." Yet anyone who really reads the Easter Story will see that it wasn't just Thomas who doubted! NONE of the disciples believed the Easter Story at first! Granted, Thomas did persist longest in his doubt, but that was merely because he happened to be absent when Jesus revealed Himself to all the other disciples, spoke to them, and let them see the wounds in His hands and His side! (John 20:20)

Mary Magdalene was the first to arrive at the empty tomb, but she merely thinks someone has taken or stolen the body. She doesn't think "He's Risen!" (as Jesus had told them all beforehand). No! She thinks "missing body" or "grave robbers." She makes a deduction from reason and not from faith. The tomb is empty, the dead body of Jesus was there, but isn't there any more, and therefore someone must have taken it.

Then come Peter and John, both running to the tomb in absolute bewilderment. In verse 8 John is said to be the first to believe — but exactly what he believed remains a mystery to this day! Because the very next verse (inserted to explain the disciples lack of faith) we read: *"They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."*

So what exactly did John believe? In all honesty — we don't know. It may have been little more than belief in what Mary had told them — that the body was gone. But at any rate it surely was NOT full-fledged faith in the resurrection or verse 9 would have said: *"All but John still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead."*

Then, we read that after all the other disciples go back to their houses (v. 10) — still scratching their heads and wondering with Mary who would have taken the dead body of Jesus — Mary Magdalene goes back to the tomb grief-stricken. Jesus had died in a shameful way, and now even in death his body is treated in yet another shameful way.

She goes to the tomb, and Jesus, seeing her sorrow, comes up behind her, and asks her why she's crying and what she's looking for (even though He knows full well the answer to both questions). And Mary, thinking He's the gardener, says to Him: "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have taken Him and I will get Him." (Still having no idea it's Jesus.)

But then Jesus, with unspeakable tenderness simply says her name: "Mary." And at hearing Him say her name (like He had 1000 times before) she turns and cries out in Aramaic: "Rabboni!" which means "Teacher!" And with uncontrollable joy and excitement she lunges forward, and tries to hug Him!

Which means what? Which means that just like Doubting Thomas, and Doubting Peter, and Doubting John, and all the other doubting disciples, so also Doubting Mary needed a little evidence before she believed. She needed an encounter with the resurrected Jesus where He revealed Himself to her, and called her by name.

And can I say that is exactly what Jesus still does in the lives of all who come to faith? He calls them by name. It's a beautiful illustration of the truth so often neglected in contemporary preaching — what the Reformers called "The Doctrine of the Effectual Call" — whereby the Holy Spirit extends to the doubter or unbeliever the irresistible call to faith deep down in his or her soul.

Speaking of the inward, supernatural grace of the Holy Spirit which we label "the effectual call," Charles Spurgeon once said:

"A man is not saved against his will, but he is made willing by the operation of the Holy Ghost. A mighty grace which he does not wish to resist enters into the man, disarms him, makes a new creature of him, and he is saved."

We see it all the time. A thousand people may be listening to an evangelist preach, some nodding off, and others distracted by the worries of the day, others listening but unmoved, and yet others hanging on every word in rapt attention!

In the soul of many, nothing happens, but in the soul of some there is a stirring of the affections — what John Wesley referred to in his conversion as his "heart being strangely warmed" as he listened to the truth of the gospel being read from the introduction to Luther's commentary on Galatians.

That's what the Holy Spirit does: As the evangelist speaks, the Holy Spirit moves in conjunction with the preached Word, and hearts of particular people are warmed, tears start flowing, their resistance to Christ is softened, and lights start going on all over the place in their minds as they grasp the spiritual mysteries of the Gospel, sense the need to repent, and willingly put their trust in Jesus.

Where there once was hardness and resistance, there is now this desire for Jesus. They all of a sudden feel they must have Jesus. Their soul senses itself being drawn like a magnet to Jesus and they won't rest until they have Jesus!

WHY? Because like Mary on Easter morning, He's calling them by name! It's the inner effectual call that God extends to some yet not all of the many who are present. Most of you can remember it well. Sensing the Holy Spirit stirring in your heart, "a mighty grace which you did not wish to resist filled your heart" and you found yourself wanting and needing to settle with Jesus! He doesn't just come and say "Believe!" He comes and prompts belief, changes your heart, implants tender yearnings and affections for Himself, until, like Mary, you rush to embrace Him or lay hold of Him by faith.

Paul gives us an example of that effectual call in the life of a woman named Lydia in Acts 16. We often hear pastor's preach on the outward call of the Gospel from the same chapter of Acts, where Paul says to the Philippian Jailor (v. 31) — *"Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."*

I've heard numerous sermons on that text. But I've only heard one person (John Reisinger) ever preach on the inward effectual call in verse 14, where the Holy Spirit does a powerful work of grace in the heart of one particular woman while the Paul is preaching the Gospel.

In her case we are told that she is merely one of many Jewish ladies who gathered at the river for prayer on the Sabbath (as was the custom of Jews in a city where there was no synagogue). And as Paul preaches to the women gathered there, it says of Lydia, *"The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message."* (Acts 16:14)

There are a number of Jewish women there, but only ONE responds to the Gospel message, and Luke is quick to tell us why: Because in her case, as opposed to all the others, the Lord, the Spirit of Jesus, or the Holy Spirit, "opens her heart to believe Paul's message."

Or in keeping with today's text we could say, He came to her, and called her inwardly by name. His mighty grace touches her heart / enlightens her mind with a Spirit-spawned conviction that it was all true ("All the lights went on" as a friend from Louisiana put it the other day as she spoke to me on the phone about her conversion) — and Lydia finds her heart filled with yearnings for Jesus / and she comes to believe and embrace Him by faith — her heart opened and made willing and able (as Luke tells us) by the gracious influences of the Holy Spirit.

It assures us that Spurgeon was right again when he said on another occasion (this one I have taped to the podium in my office so I see it every Sunday before I enter the pulpit):

"We might preach till our tongues rotted, till we should exhaust our lungs and die, but never a soul would be converted unless there were a mysterious power going with it — the Holy Ghost changing the will of man. Oh Sirs! We might as well preach to stone walls as preach to humanity unless the Holy Spirit be with the word, to give it power to convert the soul."

And that's especially true of the resurrection: It is no easy thing to believe. That's why none of the disciples did — Not just poor Thomas, but all of them together — at least not until He appeared to all of them, and spoke with all of them, and showed all of them the wounds in His hands and His side.

That's my point: No one can really believe Jesus rose from the dead unless the Holy Spirit comes to them, reveals Jesus as living to them, and enables them to believe.

The resurrection is a miracle of such phenomenal, extraordinary, and unequalled IMPROBABILITY that to believe it one must have the assisting grace of the Holy Spirit, or they will not believe! To suggest otherwise is really to trivialize the MAGNITUDE of the MIRACLE we call the resurrection.

 That's why I say we need to make room for the Agnostic and the Doubter — because Jesus did. In most of us there is a bit of the agnostic—like man from Mark's Gospel who says to Jesus: "Lord I believe, help thou my unbelief." There's a part of me that believes, Lord, but there's another part that doesn't. Help me overcome the part that disbelieves and doubts. And Jesus does.

He doesn't chastise the man and say: You'll get nothing from me until you eradicate every spec of unbelief! No, He accepts His imperfect faith as trust & grants his wish. Likewise, He doesn't rebuke MARY for being so slow to believe. / He doesn't chastise PETER or JOHN for failing to get it even when they see the empty tomb. He doesn't refuse to come to ALL THE DISCIPLES or THOMAS until after they believe.

NO! He graciously condescends to their obvious struggle to believe such a phenomenal miracle by appearing to them, speaking with them, and letting them see or touch the wounds in His hands and side. He doesn't first demand faith as the prerequisite to an audience with Him. But rather, He first comes to them and as a result of His gracious condescension in coming to dispel their doubts and unbelief, they believe!

His approach is not hard and demanding, it's tender and gentle, because He knows how HARD it is to believe that one should rise from the dead.

 So what's our part in it all? Richard Sibbes tells us: When the Spirit moves within, stirring up holy inclinations, we should promptly turn those "motions" into "holy resolutions."

When the Holy Spirit softens our hearts and prompts us to repent or turn from sin, we should promptly RESOLVE to repent and turn from sin. No hesitation, no waiting, no delay—just do it!

When the Holy Spirit convinces us of the truth of the Gospel, and compels us to embrace Christ by faith, and trust Him to our eternal salvation, we should PROMPTLY embrace Him and RESOLVE to trust Him without delay!

“COME!” cries the Spirit within us, as He urges us with tender yearnings for Christ. “COME NOW!” — “Just as you are and waiting not, to cleanse your soul from one dark blot!”

“Let us not these motions die in us,” says Sibbes. “How many holy motions are kindled in hearing the word...but die as soon as they are kindled for want of resolution. Let us not give up until these motions be turned into purposes, and those purposes ripened to holy actions, that they may not be nipped in the blossom, but may bring forth perfect fruit.”

Is the Spirit moving upon your heart today? Is He prompting you to turn and cast ourselves upon Christ in saving and unreserved trust? Do you sense your spirit moved with tender yearnings for Jesus? Is He showing you Christ as Savior, risen from the dead, and calling you by name to come to Him? Because if so, then by the mercies of God I call you to run to Christ and embrace Him!

Satan would have you wait! That’s what Satan always says, Not now! Give it some time! Don’t be hasty! What will people think?

But the Spirit’s call is always “Come!” “The Spirit and the Bride say come! And let him who hears say, Come! Whosoever is thirsty let him come! Let anyone who desires take and drink freely from the gift of the water of life.” (Rev. 22:17)

Make the Spirit’s motions your resolutions,
and do what He’s prompting you to do!