

"Easter: God's Project"
A Sermon on Luke 24:1-12
April 4, 2010

Pastor John R. Pederson
Augustana Lutheran Church
Denver, Colorado

If you have come to Easter morning hoping to find ratification for, as Richard Ford's character Frank Bascombe says, "the optimist's holiday, the holiday with the suburbs in mind" you will not find much at this empty tomb. If you have come to Easter morning expecting to see from your pastor some "knowing, homiletic grin"¹ announcing that, just like a good morality play, the good always eventually triumphs, you won't find it in this sermon. If you have come to Easter morning expecting an annual exhortation that as dependably as spring, Lent sprouts tendrils of new Easter life, you might like Peter wonder what happened. If you come, like the women that first Easter morning, looking for something that isn't there, you may end up with little more than nonsense, an "idle tale."

For, as it turns out, Easter is not a disposition, a smug certainty, or an annual spring pep talk so that you and might again "march on toward the dark . . . [our] banners all aflutter,"² Easter is the vindicated, resurrected Christ showing up in your life. The resurrection of Jesus is God's gift to you. Now your life reflects his; his resurrection yours. Jesus' resurrection takes us over, you could say. Because of the risen Christ, God is up to something in your life. Because of Jesus' resurrection, now your life starts to get really interesting.

At the crack of dawn, the women – they alone stayed and watched as Jesus died -- found nothing so predictable as a corpse. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, James' mother, another Mary and the rest of the women met at the tomb only the echo of their own voices. They had their own honorable project in mind, but it turns out they had brought the wrong equipment. The burial spices were no good anymore. They came expecting something ordinary and entirely predictable, and didn't find it. The effect is that they become bewildered, addled. Well, wouldn't you be?

With a touch of impertinence, two men asked them why they sought the living among the dead. That scared them some. "Remember what he *said*? He said there was something *necessary* in what has happened this week."³ The women's morning project may have been honorable, but ". . . [t]hey should have known better."⁴ Remembering now, the women went and told the other disciples. Too busy, they were, with whatever projects they were up to, they dismissed the report as nonsense. Finally, almost as an afterthought, Peter sticks his head into the tomb. He went home confused, wondering. "An idle tale" was the best they could manage to make of the

¹ Both of these quotations are from Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), p. 204.

² Ford, p. 238.

³ Luke 9:22; 13:33; 17:25.

⁴ David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), p. 430.

morning. No matter what they all expected, the effects of the news that comes today from an empty tomb is “confusion, disturbance, and doubt.”⁵ God is up to something in these people.

Since these people at that first Easter are examples of the wrong kind, we are forewarned that the projects we bring today will be frustrated as well. If all our projects get no real help from God today, what then? What special Easter confusion and grace can we claim for ourselves?

The grace of Easter morning lies not in plasma physics or some spiritual sparks that fly from the tomb. The grace of Easter morning is not about a resuscitation or revivification of Jesus.⁶ The grace of Easter morning lies not in our *understanding* or any other of our projects. The grace of Easter morning does not come from this world and cannot be made understandable to it.⁷ If it were, our burden would only be the more heavy. Then we would make of Easter just one more performance – ours.

There is much more going on here, and the yawning disconnect between what they all expected and what God wrought is profound. The grace of Easter lies in what *God* makes of it. And God makes of Easter not a ‘should,’ or an ‘ought’ or any other sort of new project or aspiration for us to strive for. Easter “interrupts the world’s reality with a supreme statement in the indicative mood.”⁸ Easter is an “is.”

In Easter you and I are set free – indicative – from a sham existence. The best you and I could do in all of our self-realization, self-discovery, self-invention was to lie. We tried – and oh, have we tried – to be doers, makers, actors. We tried to become one with our deeds and our works. We tried our best to be free on our own. It didn’t work. “You can’t bring yourself to life,”⁹ and the cross has been the proof of it.

The grace of this morning tells the truth about God. David Tiede writes,

Jesus is not merely springing back to life. The death and resurrection of Jesus is an encounter between the reign of God and sinful humans, and God is not mocked.¹⁰

In Jesus cross and resurrection both God’s judgment and mercy has been rendered on human “willfulness, ignorance, and sin.”¹¹ God’s judgment is that in the death of Jesus we are told who

⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation Commentary Series (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1990), p. 284.

⁶ Tiede, pp 151, 428.

⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (London: T & T Clark, 2001), p. 261.

⁸ Jüngel, p. 261.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 267.

¹⁰ Tiede, p. 431.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 429.

we are. God's mercy in Easter is the from now on "we are what he creates."¹² Now, we are "amazed at ourselves," what God is making of us.¹³ With Easter we "begin a new existence . . . [we] have not brought into being."¹⁴

The grace of Easter is that you and I no longer know what to make of ourselves. All of our projects are rendered befuddled, addled, confused. They and " . . . [w] e must be told who we are."¹⁵ In this, of course we are rank beginners, and we will always be. But this news from an empty tomb is the delirious beginning, and it means that we can be "here in a new way, and enjoy it."¹⁶

A creation of God is beginning in us . . . For this reason . . . the whole world [can] sink to the bottom of Jesus' cross. Something new and glorious is arising in its place: the new creation of God.¹⁷

Now life is getting interesting. "Now we have no need to create a cosmos out of the chaos all by ourselves."¹⁸ Just like those others at the empty tomb, it doesn't really matter what project of yours brings you here on Easter. Based on what he has told you, you should have known better. From now on you and I are God's project.

Luke is alone among the gospel writers in that for him Easter isn't the end of the story. It is just the halfway point. Luke can hardly wait to write to you in the book of Acts about how God's project is doing. And we wait and watch to see how God's project is doing in you.

Your projects may be entirely honorable, but like the first women there, you should have known better. Easter throws everything off balance.¹⁹ Easter exposes our projects as shams. From now on your are what God creates. This may be strange, but it is not a foreign life. It is the life for which you were created.

So if today you are perplexed, you are in good company. But watch carefully tomorrow and in all the tomorrows of your life. "He is risen indeed," and from now on you are God's project.

¹² Hans J. Iwand, *The Righteousness of Faith According to Luther*, trans. by Randi H. Lundell (Eugene, Oregon: WIPF & Stock, 2008), p. 72.

¹³ Jüngel, p. 267.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Oswald Bayer, *Freedom in Response: Lutheran Ethics: Sources and Controversies*, trans. by Jeffrey F. Cayzer (Oxford: University Press, 2007), p. 54.

¹⁶ Jüngel, p. 267.

¹⁷ Adolf Schlatter cited in Roy A. Harrisville, *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 2006), p. 54.

¹⁸ Bayer, *Freedom in Response*, p. 54.

¹⁹ Cf. Flannery O'Connor, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), p. 152.