

## Bigger than Burning



Um, excuse me.

Eyes up here.

Look at you. Put a screen in front of your faces and you're as glued to it as my kids do when they watch *Game of Thrones*.

Anyway-

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. So I figure a picture as sexy and impressive as this one has to be worth at least, what, three thousand words? In which case, thus endeth the sermon. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

This picture was taken three weeks ago on Easter Sunday when, in my sermon, I noted how in Matthew's resurrection story God's angel doesn't bother reassuring Caesar's people to be not afraid. Maybe, I preached, for people like us, people like Caesar's people- people for whom the kingdoms of this world work pretty darn well- the proper response to the news of resurrection is fear.

Maybe we should be scared, I concluded.

To which, one of you primped and seersuckered listeners, was later overheard from two tables down at River Bend Bistro excoriating my sermon, complaining that "his point was absurd and insensitive and he was even vulgar in getting to it."

And while stabbing his breakfast sausages with feral glee, this Easter brunch begrudger was overheard griping "It was almost like he didn't care whether his sermon hurt our feelings or not."

Fair enough. Both my spouse and my Strength Finders report rank me low in the sensitivity department. Fine. Whatever.

But then, from across his two top bistro table, his wife, reportedly threw up her hands over her french toast and grouched aloud: "Easter's supposed to be comforting not upsetting." And then, as if polling the brunch crowd, she asked: "What's so scary about Easter?"

Obviously it didn't take long for my post-cancer honeymoon to end and things to settle back to normal. Don't worry, though, I've since reconciled with Dennis and Sharon and I got their permission to share that anecdote so no harm, no foul.



I'll you tell though that question still sticks in my craw "What's so scary about Easter?" because "Sharon" wasn't the only one who asked me it on the way home Easter Sunday.

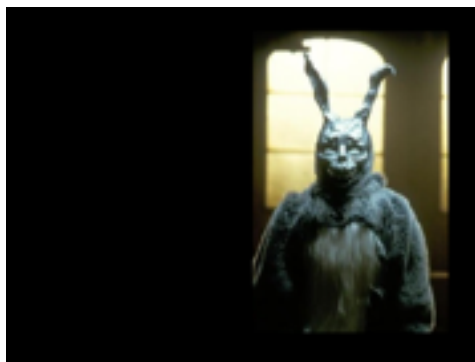
What's so scary about Easter? Isn't it obvious?

I mean, you don't even have to turn to scripture to realize what's so scary about Easter. Clearly, Exhibit A is the Easter Bunny. At least Santa lets you sit on his lap. Has anyone ever come across a single one of those little rodents who would let you hold them without nicking up your arms?

And as soon as my youngest began Family Life at school this spring, he started asking me where the Easter Bunny gets these eggs? Does she baby-snatch them? Is she in a close, committed relationship with a rooster? Is she even a she? He wondered while riding shotgun in my Bronco.

The Easter Bunny is creepy scary.

I mean-  
Have you seen the 2001 film *Donnie Darko*?



In that movie the Easter Bunny managed to come across as even creepier than Patrick Swayze playing an oily self-help guru-



That's even more terrifying than Patrick Swayze singing "She's like the Wind" all the way to the top of the charts in 1987.

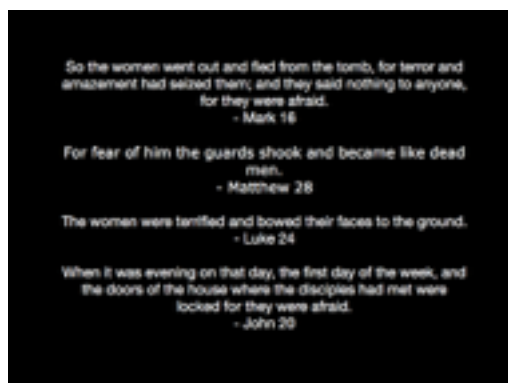
That's scary stuff. And as Bodhi says in *Point Break*:



"Fear causes hesitation and hesitation causes even your worst fears to come true." And, we all know, nobody puts Bodhi in a corner.

So it's not just Patrick Swayze and the Easter Bunny that are flesh-crawling frightening.

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.  
Why?

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Why are they so scared?

Are they afraid that what Caesar did Jesus might still be done to them?

Or do they fear the news that this particular Jesus has come back? This Jesus who harassed them for three years, who called them to abandon their family businesses and complicated their lives with talk of cross-bearing.

Are they afraid that they’re not finally rid of this Jesus after all? Is *Jesus* what’s so scary about the news “Jesus has been resurrected!”?

Or-

Is it the word itself that makes them white-knuckled afraid?

Was that word, resurrection, enough to provoke not just awe but frightened shock?

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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 himself, 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 committed 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 hairy double-edged sword, even scarier than Patrick Swayze and the Easter Bunny. Resurrection wasn't about lilies and cloud-wisped harps.

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 knew their scripture, and they knew they'd abandoned Jesus.

They'd denied ever knowing him. They'd turned tail, turned a blind eye, washed their hands of his blood. They'd scapegoated him into suffering, and stood silently by while others mocked him and taunted him.

They'd let the world sin all its sins into him and then left him forsaken on a cross.

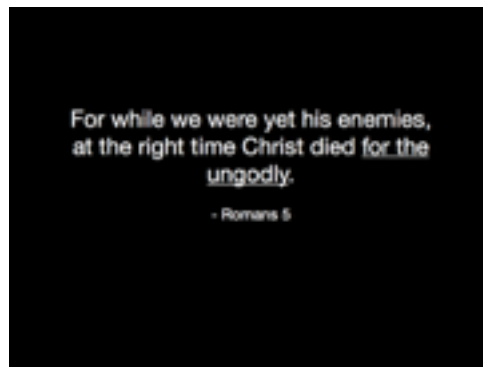
For sinners like them, resurrection could only mean one thing: brimstone.

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.

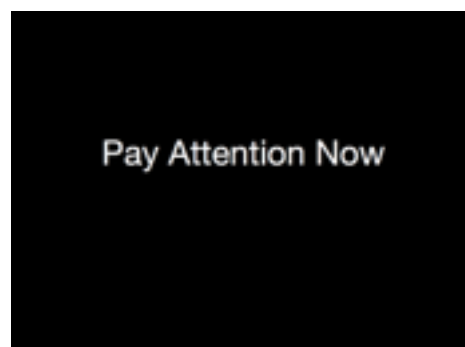
The shock of Easter isn't just the empty grave it's that God comes back from the it and doesn't condemn the unrighteous ones who put him there.



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.

But-



pay attention now, that good news- that isn't the Gospel.

The Gospel is bigger than the forgiveness of our sin. The Gospel is bigger than our being delivered from damnation; it's bigger than burning.

Because when the Risen Christ slips behind our locked doors on Easter night, the first word he says to his disciples is "Peace."

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And that word "Peace" it's not the first century equivalent of "S'up."



Or, "Howdy." Jesus isn't like "Hey, how's it going guys?"

John renders it into Greek, *eirini*. It comes to us through the Latin, *pax*. Jesus would've spoken it in Aramaic, ܩܠܝܢܐ, which the disciples would've received from the Hebrew: שלום.



And in the Hebrew Bible, shalom doesn't mean simply "peace." It's a thick, pregnant word that means health, prosperity, wholeness, restoration, and repair- all of it. Literally, shalom is "the state where nothing is broken and nothing is missing."



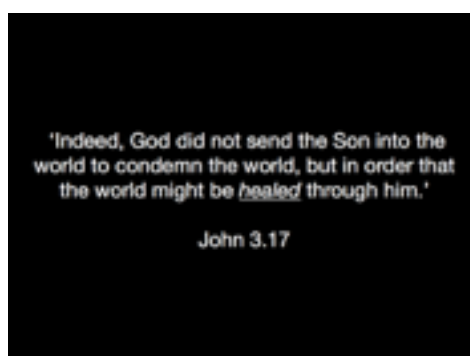
"Why have you forsaken me?"  
"Forgive them for they know not what they do."

Those are the last words of the Old World, and peace, shalom, is the First Word of the New World, and it's not an incidental salutation. It's the word that summarizes what God is doing in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

Practically everyone in the world can recite John 3.16 by heart.



But even though Tim Tebow has plenty of time on his hands now he, like everyone else, forgets the very next verse:





“God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that through him the world might be *healed*.”

God did not send the Son into the world to condemn it but to heal the world, to repair the world, to restore the world, to shalom it.

That’s what the Easter Gospels want you to see.

The judgement that word ‘resurrection’ signaled comes not to us but to our Judge, who was judged in our place and who comes back from death and forgives us.

And the life with God that word ‘resurrection’ promised is a life here, now and forever, where the Kingdom comes- just as he taught us to pray. The life promised by that word ‘resurrection’ isn’t an evacuation but a restoration.

It’s not about a new location; it’s about a new creation.

New Creation- that’s why John gives you the otherwise embarrassing detail that Mary took Jesus, wearing only his birthday suit, to be the gardener.

John wants you to see that Mary is right. He is the Gardener. He’s a New Adam for a New Creation. The Old World died with him in the Good Friday night- he put Sin to death- and now God walks in the garden not in the cool of the evening but in the dawn of a new day.

John wants you to see that just as the Old World had been born in a garden, on Easter a New World is inaugurated in a garden where Jesus, like a Second Adam, walks with another Eve, naked and unashamed.

You see- don’t you?

See that what John wants to show you through story is what Paul proclaims in his preaching:

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the New Creation has come: the Old World has gone, the New World has arrived.”

“God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself and Christ has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

The ministry of restoration.

The ministry of healing and repair. Of *שְׁלוֹם*.

It’s our work now- that’s what John shows you next, when a presumably still naked Jesus breathes on to them.

Weird- unless what John wants you to see is that just as God in the first garden takes the adamah, the soil of the earth, and breathes into it the breath of life and from it brings

forth life, Jesus takes the grime of these disciples' fear and failure and he breathes upon them the Holy Spirit, the breath of life.

He reconstitutes them. He shaloms them, as a new humanity, and then he gives to them his new creation work of makings things on earth as it is in heaven.

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The Gospel- the message we proclaim- isn't that Christ died for you. No, that isn't the Gospel because judgement is only one half the meaning of that word 'resurrection.'

And our message isn't that God loves you. I wish it were that easy, but the other half of that word, resurrection, asks so much more of us.

The Gospel isn't just that you've been saved from burning.  
The Gospel is that you've been saved *for* something.

שלום

If that's the whole Gospel, if that's both sides to that word "resurrection," then the question we need to ask isn't "If you died tomorrow, do you know where you'd spend eternity?"

The right question to ask is "Is anything keeping us from entering Christ's New Creation work *fully*?"

Is anything keeping us from entering  
Christ's New Creation work *fully*?

Does anything prevent us as a community from living a life worthy of our Easter commissioning?

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Perhaps you've heard already during this capital campaign that the debt we carry costs us about \$22,000 per month.

You heard that right: \$22,000 every month. More than Aldersgate pays its pastors in a year, it gives to BB&T for a debt it has carried longer than it has had Dennis leading it.

So let me rephrase that Gospel question: could we fulfill more of our New Creation calling without that debt?

Before you answer, consider:



In 2012, we raised money for and we built a kitchen for an elementary school in Chikisis, Guatemala, a community where that school provides the only hot, healthy meal those hundreds of kids will eat during the day.

That kitchen cost us about \$15,000 or about 3 weeks worth of debt payments.



In 2013, we raised money for and we built a clinic in the neighboring village of Chuicutama because those highland communities are too remote for easy access to medical care.

The clinic cost us about \$35,000, a little more than what we pay out in 6 weeks to BB&T.



Next, we fundraised and we built a complete sanitation system for Chuicutama. We worked our tails off, and I got in all kinds of trouble with the bishop for using the word 'toilet' in church because when you're lucky enough to take toilets for granted you're lucky enough to judge the word toilet inappropriate

That project took 2 years and cost about \$50,000. It was the biggest project we've ever done and it still only cost us 9 weeks of debt payments.



This summer we're building a high school in that community and an irrigation well in Ft Apache, Arizona. The well costs less than a month's worth of debt payments.

Does anything prevent us as a community from living a life worthy of our commissioning? You tell me.

Already this year Aldersgate helped a woman, with two young children, who was undergoing treatment for breast cancer and unable to work for a few months.

We assisted a nurse whose teenage daughter was the victim of violent, physical abuse by her boy friend and unable to work.

We paid rent for a young mother whose husband had lost his job. They have a 3 month old boy, a 3 year old boy, and a 1 yr old daughter with Downs Syndrome.

And none of it comes close to what we give BB&T in a month.

On Sundays we make dinner, go into DC, turn on soul music, set out tables and chairs, and sit down for a meal *with not* for the homeless, treating them like people not charity cases, like they are the brothers and sisters that Jesus Christ has in fact made them to us.



And in a year we do that for less than we spend on 1 week's worth of debt.

It's not that buildings are bad. No, I taught confirmation in Shepherd Hall just last Sunday. It's the space where we shape our kids' character. It's not that the building is bad; it's that the debt is sinful.

Aldersgate is changing lives around the world and just around the corner.

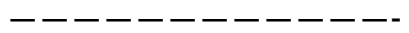
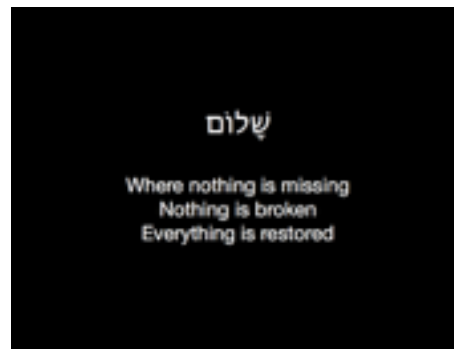
But we could be doing so much more.

That Toilet Project- it's so desperately needed in the surrounding communities in Guatemala we literally could build 1 sanitation system per year until I'm older than Bernie Sanders.

We could do so much more.

In our own neighborhood even. Just think- at Stratford Landing Elementary there are 200 kids living in poverty. 100 of the kids there have no father in their lives and all but 3 of them live in poverty too.

And, it's not just about spending money. It's about whether we want to keep expending so much of our church's time and energy and so many of our most talented lay people on debt work instead of on Gospel work.



You know-

The more I think about it, the more I'm convinced I was wrong this Easter. What's really frightening about Easter, scarier even than the Easter Bunny and Patrick Swayze, is the fact that the Risen Jesus believes we're capable of more than we think we're capable of.

It's unnerving to think that Jesus thinks we can accomplish more significant things than the status quo we settle for, that we're capable not just of charity but his shalom.

When you think about Easter in those terms, you've got to wonder if, subconsciously at least, our debt isn't like that locked door the disciples try to put between them and the Risen Christ.

Maybe it's our way of keeping Easter at a comfortable remove from us.

**April 17, 2016**  
**3rd Sunday in Eastertide**

**John 20**

If so, it should scare us that the Risen Jesus apparently has no trouble slipping past the doors we try to close against him.

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