

Finding Meaning in the Stories of Easter

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12 Acts 10:34-43
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I know it's been almost a decade, but I'm still a huge fan of the *Lord of the Rings* movies, and certainly of J.R.R. Tolkien's monumental books before them. As I was thinking this week about the never-ending debates between religious traditionalists and progressives, I remembered a fascinating scene from one of those movies. Toward the end of the middle movie, *The Two Towers*, the greedy and obsessed creature Gollum, who had once been a gentle hobbit-like person named Sméagol, has a somewhat schizophrenic argument with himself – with each side of his tortured personality striving to dominate the other.

I find Christianity a lot like that. Pick any moment in the past 2000 years and you will hear any number of arguments between good religious folks on various sides of any number of issues – each vying for power and dominance by trying to prove their case, while hoping to expose their opponent as simply wrong.

Within the past 150 years, these debates have most often dealt with **what type of language was used by biblical authors in telling their stories. Are their stories the simple eyewitness reporting of literal, historical events? Or, are they reflections that use metaphorical language to point to and reveal the particular truths they are trying to get across to their readers? Or, some combination of both?**

For instance: Was Jesus born of an actual virgin? Did he know he was the messiah? Did he intentionally die to redeem humankind? Was Jesus God? And important for our discussion on this Easter Sunday, was Jesus physically and bodily resurrected from the dead?

Since last fall, those of us who have been participating in the Book Study Small Group here at the church have immersed ourselves in a book that often sounds a lot like Gollum arguing with himself. It's entitled, ***The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions***. As the title suggests, there are two authors, both of which are leading Jesus scholars with widely divergent views. **Marcus Borg**, the progressive, and **N.T. Wright**, the traditionalist, go back and forth on a variety of topics, presenting opposing visions of Jesus that shape our faith today.

One of the sections in the book is called, "God Raised Jesus From the Dead." Wright entitles his essay concerning this topic, "The Transforming Reality of the Bodily Resurrection." Borg entitles his essay, "The Truth of Easter." I want to share a bit of their work with you this morning. In doing so I realize that I risk being too academic for some – especially on what should be a rousing and inspiring Easter Sunday.

I do this in part, however, because of some recent criticism that I have leveled at my fellow Presbyterian pastor colleagues at our Wednesday morning Bible lectionary

study group. My criticism goes as follows: **there is not a Presbyterian pastor within the past several generations that *hasn't* been taught, or at least exposed to, this "radical progressive stuff" at seminary. Yet many pastors, perhaps most, do not actually teach and preach what they have been taught. Why? Either because they don't believe it themselves, or for fear that their church members will be disturbed and offended by this new-fangled information about the Bible and theology.** So, for instance, even though the adult church school class here at College Hill has just finished a 21-week course on progressive Christianity, which was indeed shocking to some who had never been exposed to this information before, it really nothing all that new.

In his traditionally focused essay, N.T. Wright does a very good job of expanding the ultimately unanswerable question, "What happened on Easter Day?" to the larger question, "Why did Christianity arise, and why did it take the shape it did?" This is a great question.

He concludes that the various Easter stories in the four Gospels do indeed reflect some measure of eyewitness accounts of a very real historical event. For Wright, and still a majority of Christians, **believing in a literal bodily resurrection of Jesus is a necessity.**

Marcus Borg counters that the stories of Easter do not reflect events that could have been photographed or recorded on videotape, if this technology had existed. In other words, **these biblical stories are *not* eyewitness accounts.**

He also disagrees about whether the truth of Easter *depends* upon an empty tomb. In true progressive fashion, Borg asks, "Does the truth of Easter depend upon the empty tomb and appearance stories being historically factual in this objective sense?" He answers by making a bold claim, a claim in which I now personally affirm (though only after years of struggle to understand, and after countless internal Gollum-like arguments with myself).

Borg states, **"I see the empty tomb and whatever happened to the corpse of Jesus to be ultimately irrelevant to the truth of Easter."** While some certainly consider that to be a purely heretical statement, Borg goes on to explain how he himself has moved from a childhood belief that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the tomb. His argument, it needs to be noted, is not that we know the tomb was not empty or that nothing happened to Jesus body, but simply that it doesn't matter. ***It simply doesn't matter.***

While I consider this particular debate to be of deep importance and significance, I also realize that the real issue for most people sitting in the pews isn't so much about the exact nature of these Easter stories themselves and the kind of language that was used to tell them, but rather: **What do these stories mean, and what difference does that make in the life of the Christian church, and in our own lives?**

Realizing this, after presenting their cases about whether these stories are literal or metaphorical, Wright and Borg go on to explain their understanding of the meaning behind these Easter and resurrection stories.

Wright, the traditionalist, says some things that may actually surprise you. After describing that he has heard many devout, yet inadequate sermons on the topic of Easter, he states, "I have heard, for instance, that **Jesus' resurrection proves the existence of life after death.**" I was a bit shocked when he followed that with, **"That certainly was *not* the point for the first Christians:** they already believed in life after death, and in resurrection after *'life after death.'* For them, Jesus' resurrection meant that the story of God, Israel, and the world had entered its new phase."

Wright concludes that **the deepest meanings of the resurrection have to do with new creation**. "If the stories are metaphors for anything," he says, "they are metaphors for the belief that God's new world had been brought to birth." Now those are points that I believe not just traditionalists, but also a lot of us who call ourselves progressives agree with as well.

Though taking a much different approach to the stories themselves, Marcus Borg, the progressive, still believes that **Easter is utterly central to Christianity**. He states, in fact, that "God raised Jesus from the dead" is the foundational affirmation of the New Testament. He also agrees with Wright that the best explanation for the rise of Christianity – indeed, the only adequate explanation – is the resurrection of Jesus.

He also agrees, to which some progressives might be surprised, that **the central meaning of Easter is twofold: Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord**. "Both claims are essential: Easter means that Jesus was experienced after his death, and that he is both Lord and Christ." That's a lot more commonality in the meaning behind Easter than I expected between two major players in the traditionalist/progressive debate. Borg concludes:

For me, the historical ground of Easter is very simple: the followers of Jesus, both then and now, continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death...Thus **I see the post-Easter Jesus as an experiential reality**. Christians throughout the centuries have continued to experience Jesus as a living spiritual reality, a figure of the present, not simply a memory from the past. **The truth of Easter is grounded in these experiences, not in what happened (or didn't happen) on a particular Sunday almost two thousand years ago.**

Unfortunately, we don't have time this morning to get into the debate of what the biblical claim "**Jesus died for our sins**" means. But let me briefly reflect **the progressive understanding that it is a metaphorical proclamation of the radical grace of God, rather than a claim that Jesus' blood was required before God could forgive**. In other words, **God has already taken care of whatever it is that we think separates us from God**. If our own sense of sin and guilt, or unworthiness or failure, makes us feel unacceptable by God, then we simply have not understood that God has already taken care of it.

As the Apostle Paul put it, "Christ is the end of the law," meaning the end of the system of requirements and failing to measure up. Of course, if we don't see this, nothing in our life changes. But if we do see this, then our sense of ourselves in relationship to God changes dramatically.

So whether you consider the Easter stories of the resurrection to be the recording of an actual historical event, or as metaphor, I want to encourage you to reflect upon the meaning behind these stories, and what it means when we claim, as Christians, that Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord.

For behind these claims lie the power to change lives, and the power to create new forms of community. Ultimately, Easter is a story of vindication, of God's "yes" to Jesus, and God's "yes" to you and me. As DeWayne Zimmerman wrote, "The message of the resurrection is not simply, 'don't be afraid to die,' but 'don't be afraid to live.'"

He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Amen.