

The Hammer of a Higher God

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Boarding time was fast approaching when I realized that the book that I'd packed for the flight from London to Houston wasn't big enough to last the whole way home. So, I ducked into a bookstore in duty-free and emerged with Theodore Zeldin's "An Intimate History of Humanity." I didn't know Zeldin from a zebra, but time was short, and the chapter titles looked intriguing so I bought the book and ran for my gate.

After folding my body into the space allocated to me in Economy Class, I cracked open the book. The author had me from the opening title of the first chapter: "How humans have repeatedly lost hope, and how new encounters, and a new pair of spectacles, revive them."

This observation could apply to many kinds of hope, and many different ways we lose hope. But this morning, on the sunny side of Easter, there's one particular hope that comes to mind, the hope that death does not have the last word.

I will confess to you that I lack patience for those preachers who pretend that they have it all figured out. I distrust those who are certain about things even Jesus puzzled over, and those who pretend they have a private line to heaven.

For instance, when I hear a preacher waxing eloquent about what the resurrection of the dead will be like, converting the inconceivable mystery of eternity into a family reunion, I find myself running for the exit. And it is not just because of the sentimentality. I find myself revolting against the impulse to reduce the enormity and inconceivability of God and God's future to something we can easily imagine.

When we speak of Easter, let us not speak familiarly. Here we are treading on Holy Ground. Better to sit in silence than to presume upon the vastness of God. We entrust all that we cannot know to him whom we cannot name. Especially here, especially standing beside the gaping hole in which Jesus was laid to rest.

The three biblical figures who, according to the Gospel of John, came to that empty tomb that first Easter morning certainly didn't have resurrection figured out, not even when the risen Jesus was standing right in front of them.

Mary Magdalene didn't recognize Jesus when she met him outside his tomb. She had been a disciple of Jesus for a long time, but she thought the risen Jesus was the gardener.

Saint Peter starts his first letter to the early church in awe and wonder at what he confesses he can't understand: By the great mercy of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Peter writes, "he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.... Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you don't see him now, you trust him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy."

In the first letter ascribed to the tradition of St. John, the writer says, “Beloved, we are now children of God, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that when Christ appears, we will be like him.”

Not even the great apostle Saint Paul had this figured out. You may remember that passage we examined a few weeks ago from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians in which Paul talked of seeds planted not looking like the mature plants that would come forth. Paul’s attempts to discuss resurrection end up in that glorious doxological passage that the poet John Donne quoted centuries, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” But Paul refuses to speculate. Like an apostolic Wittgenstein, Paul seems to say; Of that which we cannot speak, we should remain silent.

An honest confrontation with resurrection leaves even the wisest and most faithful of the saints in silence, or with questions on their lips, not answers. We are cast upon faith, trust in God for what we cannot see or know or understand. This is the region where even the most fervent creedal beliefs sound hollow, and answers inevitably betray us.

Those first disciples thought they had all the answers until Jesus was executed. They were confident. Peter was so confident he contradicted Jesus when Jesus predicted that his life was going to land him on a Roman cross instead of a Davidic throne.

They disciples were sure they knew where they were going. They had hope. Jesus was the Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God right here on Earth. Yes, sir. It wasn’t until they encountered the impossible that they realized their hopes had been too small for God. God wasn’t going to replace one human kingdom with another. That happens throughout history: one nation, one empire, one stately product of human pride and ambition following another like a parade of vanities across the centuries. That wasn’t what God was up to at all, not even in the good name of liberation and justice.

When it dawned on the disciples that God wasn’t going to liberate them from Roman oppression, and that their champion, the longed-for messiah in whom they placed their hope was dead and buried, they scattered, ran and hid. They lost their hope.

What the disciples didn’t know, cowering in hiding, was that they had finally made their first real progress in following Jesus. They’d lost their hope. Finally, they’d made their first tottering baby steps in faith, by losing a hope too small.

You can almost hear old G. K. Chesterton, that curmudgeon of early twentieth century journalism say to the disciples: “How much happier you would be, how much more of you there would be, if the hammer of a higher God could smash your small cosmos, scattering the stars like spangles, and leave you in the open, free ... to look up as well as down!”

They had constructed their little hopes, these first followers of Jesus, on the foundation of a little cosmos reigned over by their little god. Then God’s hope showed up, and they couldn’t imagine what it was they were looking at. They were shattered. Shaking behind locked doors. Fearing for their lives. And while they hid, in fact, while they slept in hiding, the resurrection already was underway.

This is one of the most remarkable things about the story of the first Easter. The new day began at sun-

down at the end of the Sabbath, of course. The first Lord's Day had begun while the disciples slumbered in their hiding place. The resurrection had already occurred, in the depths of the night, shrouded in darkness; everything the disciples counted on had been rendered obsolete while they slept.

Early in the morning, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb, now empty, to discover that they had all slept through the resurrection. She ran back to where the disciples were hidden. And before they had their first cup of coffee, she told them the news that they still couldn't believe.

Like the blind man who, even after receiving his sight from Jesus, couldn't make sense of what he was seeing, the disciples stumbled for days trying to learn to figure out where they were and what it all meant. The hammer of a higher God had crushed their little cosmos. It would take a while to make their way into this new world.

One of my favorite plays is James Goldman's "The Lion in Winter," which came to the big screen with Peter O'Toole and Katharine Hepburn in the lead roles. It's the story of the closing days of the reign of King Henry II of England. Henry's wife, the beautiful and powerful Eleanor of Aquitaine, and Henry's sons, Richard the Lionhearted, Geoffrey, and John are plotting how to counter Henry's plotting. At a climatic point in the play, as each weighs the probability of some plan or the other, Eleanor says something of theological (and not just dramatic) significance. She says, "In a world where carpenters get raised from the dead, anything is possible."

That's it. That's what the disciples discovered. They thought they had a pretty good bead on the world. They thought they had an understanding of what's what. They were walking along the edge of a flat world when suddenly the cosmic ball started bouncing. They were cowering in fear that the Romans might kill them, when the resurrection came knocking at the door. Easter is a big gaudy flashing sign telling us that no hope we can conceive of is big enough for God. And God, as C. S. Lewis once called God, "the Great Iconoclast," lies in wait with his hammer to break every little hope so we can learn to hope bigger.

Whether we are still hiding, afraid that death has the last word; or whether we are stumbling around dazed trying to make sense of a world where "anything is possible"; there's a Mary Magdalene at the door, knocking, saying, "Wake up. I have seen the Lord."

Amen.