

## The End in the Beginning

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John 20:19-31

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Easter does not arrive with resolution and a grand finale. It always arrives with disruption and bewilderment. People put to death are not supposed to return to life, our normal ways of life are not supposed to be upended, and disciples of Jesus are supposed to keep their heads down, not cause a stir, not draw attention to themselves, and keep the doors locked. And of course, it is precisely into that fearful, lock down environment that the risen Christ shows up. In fact, not only does Jesus show up in John's gospel the day of Easter, but Pentecost happens, too. Jesus tells the fearful gathering of disciples huddled together, sheltering in place with the doors locked, 'as the Father has sent me, so I send you,' and then the risen Lord breathes on them, saying, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.' In his commentary on this passage, theologian and missionary Lesslie Newbigin writes that in this encounter with Jesus, the church is formed and sent by the Spirit to bear in its own corporate life of the marks of Christ's passion.<sup>1</sup> The church in the world bears the marks of Christ's passion.

I have to say that I have not suffered much in my life and I am not confident how I would hold up under hostile pressure or scrutiny for my beliefs. The closest that I usually come to suffering for my beliefs occurs in the cabin of an airplane, just settling down for a couple hours together with a bunch of strangers and my seatmate turns to me and pops the existential question: 'so now, what do you do?' There are several options here...you can lie, which is not a great look for the larger profession though there are plenty in this line of work who have produced bigger whoppers than that...you can offer a white lie, which is something along the lines of 'I work for a religious NGO...' Or you can just rip the band aid off and own it and claim it. 'I am a Presbyterian minister.' The response is usually either 1-3 words. 'Oh.' And then a long awkward silence for the next two hours. Or maybe a 'that's nice,' and then a long awkward silence for the next two hours. Alternatively, it can lead to a wheels up to wheels down conversation on the person's views on religion, why in the world I am Presbyterian, and whether or not it is okay to say 'Namaste' at the end of a yoga session. Whichever way, it's a long plane ride.

I bring this all up because airplane trips, at least for me, have been one of the few times I have been publicly outed as a Presbyterian minister, and thus, as a disciple of Jesus Christ. The rest of the time I can pretty much live in the gray areas, perhaps where the disciples are trying to live in this passage from John. Keeping our heads down, locking our doors, not trying to draw any attention, and just keep our beliefs about God private

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<sup>1</sup> Lesslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come: An Exposition of the Fourth Gospel*, 269.

and to ourselves. In fact it's kind of funny that we are always kind of hard on Thomas for his un-willingness to believe without seeing, but even after the other disciples 'see' Jesus and he commissions them with the Holy Spirit, saying as the Father has sent me, so I send you, they are back together the next week holed up with the doors locked. There is no noticeable behavior change other than they have told Thomas that they had seen the Lord, but it doesn't seem like they have been doing a lot of exploration out in the world to make this news public. Instead, they are back a week later with the doors shut and the deadbolt locked all over again.

The challenge of taking the good news of the gospel outside the walls seems to be perennial problem not a problem just because Thomas did not get to touch Jesus' hands and side. We all are pretty well sure that the earliest gatherings of Christians were not a lecture or teaching session or a book study or a discussion of theory or handling of right information or strategy and problem solving session, but gathered around a meal. In the words of New Testament scholar, NT Wright, 'When Jesus wanted fully to explain what his [life, death, and resurrection] were all about, he didn't give a theory. He didn't give them a set of scriptural texts. He gave them a meal.'<sup>2</sup> But as Jesus himself indicates when he shows up on Easter evening at this gathering of disciples, the meal is not the culmination of their life together, but the place from which they are sent out into the world to bear witness to the power of the risen Christ, not just locked up behind their walls, but out there at work in the world, even on airplanes.

So, there are three visions that emanate from this passage from John. There is the vision of the church as ragtag group of disciples who don't really want to poke their head out of their shell. There is the vision of the risen Christ, who expects this ragtag group of disciples to be sent into the world to find where Christ is already at work and to call attention to it and participate in it. And there is this third vision that understands that this ragtag group of followers are going to fail and flail and need to regroup week after week asking again and again to receive the Holy Spirit so they can go out once again to try and make an impact for the sake of Christ in the week that unfolds before them. Teacher of preaching and worship Ron Byars wrote a book recently called 'Believer on Sunday, Atheist by Thursday' and he took the title from a friend and colleague who preached a sermon in which he said something like, 'I'm a believer on Sunday, but nearly an atheist by Thursday.' Byars explains: 'we gather with the congregation on Sunday, and faith feels relatively secure. However subtly, God makes the divine presence known, sufficiently at least to strengthen our trust, our confidence, and reenergize our hope. But when we leave the assembly, we are likely to be on our own. We reenter a world that has been demystified, as though everything real in the universe or beyond it could be

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<sup>2</sup> NT Wright, *Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters* (New York: Harper One, 2011), 180.

summed up by referring to a list of the mechanical causes and effects. In ordinary conversation, apart from curses, we are not likely to hear God mentioned, or Christ. It is as though, whatever one's personal faith, for all practical purposes we live in a godless universe. In most cases, our weekday journey meets with nothing more threatening with indifference: who cares? God-talk, church-talk is reserved for a small slice of a one-seventh slice of the week, if that. A hobby, if you like, for those so religiously inclined. Indifference fills all the space available, and faith is likely to find itself disabled, irrelevant, pushed off to a private corner. By Thursday,' he reminds us, 'we have been worn down.'<sup>3</sup>

The too soon diseased writer Rachel Held Evans, writes about her own failures to create church in a reflection on her participation in an unsuccessful church plant. Even as she and her fellow church planters failed in their efforts at their ultimate goal, she recalls that they 'were able to produce some fruit of the Spirit along the way. We baptized, broke bread, preached the Word, and confessed our sins. We created a sanctuary where people told the truth without fear. We fed the hungry and filled out paperwork with the sick. We worked through our differences with care and grace. And we learned, perhaps the hard way, that church isn't static. It's not (just) a building, or a denomination, or a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Church is a moment in time when the kingdom of God draws near, when a meal, a story, a song, an apology, and even a failure is may holy by the presence of Jesus among us and within us....and church will go on long after the grass grows through our cathedral floors.' The risen Christ, she reminds us, 'doesn't need our permission to carry on in in the endlessly resourceful work of making all things new. That we are invited to catch even a glimpse of the splendor is grace.'<sup>4</sup>

The most successful and Hall of Fame level baseball hitters fail about 70% of the time. Around 60 percent of new restaurants fail within the first year of their existence, and nearly 80 percent shutter before their fifth anniversary.<sup>5</sup> Disciples fail at being church a lot of the time. Sometimes because we lock the doors and leave after the service and think our work is done. Other times we confuse Christian discipleship with religious propaganda or power politics or the general procedures of a social club.<sup>6</sup> But our chief end, our chief purpose in this world, is right at the beginning, figuring out what it means

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<sup>3</sup> Ron Byars, *Believer on Sunday, Atheist by Thursday*, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 113.

<sup>5</sup> Jarrett Bellini, 'The No. 1 thing to consider before opening a restaurant,' <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/01/20/heres-the-real-reason-why-most-restaurants-fail.html#:~:text=Around%2060%20percent%20of%20new,actually%20being%20in%20th at%20location.>

<sup>6</sup> John Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, 271.

that we are sent back into the world not as functional atheists, but as those who are called to live in solidarity with our world and with all who are put on our path and in our lives--and to leave those around us in no doubt as to whom we belong and who we seek to follow.<sup>7</sup>

We will gather again, huddled together, perhaps fearful and anxious, maybe feeling that we are safe and secure from all that troubles us out there and all the complications and harshness of life from the week before. And week after week the crucified and risen Christ will find his way among us once again, declaring, for what must seem to him to be umpteenth and infinite time, 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' So as you go back out there, may the road rise to meet you, the wind always be at your back, the rain fall softly on your fields, and may God hold you in the palm of his hand. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> John Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community*, 282.