

The Weak After Easter

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West Side Church of Christ
Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

“And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (Luke 24:31-32 ESV).

AFTER

Scouring the internet sometimes has its advantages. Ken Sehested preached a sermon a few years ago which began with his own “Top 10” list entitled “10 reasons you know it’s the Sunday after Easter.”¹ Here are the top 5:

#5: Walmart, Walgreens & CVS rotate the Easter candy to the sale tables and bring out the Mother’s Day cards and gift ideas.

#4: The number of visitors drops dramatically.

#3: The number of people who look like visitors but are actually church members who haven’t been here for a while drops dramatically.

#2: Everyone is glad to wait another 12 months before singing “Up From the Grave He Arose.”

But what piqued my attention was his #1: You know it’s the Sunday after Easter because....

#1: The preacher gets the day off.

¹ Ken Sehested, “The Top 10 Reasons You Know It’s the Sunday After Easter,” *Prayer & Politik*. <https://prayerandpolitik.org/articles-essays-sermons/the-top-10-reasons-you-know-its-the-sunday-after-easter/>

I'm not off today, though you can imagine the good work of the Lord I could be doing on some lonely beach in Maui right now. But it got me thinking about a real life question that applies many times of the year: how we handle life the week after the party? What do we do when the celebration is over? Especially...if, for some reason...we missed it.

I don't want to speak for you, but I confess that the power and majesty of Resurrection Sunday does not describe my usual experience.

Most days just aren't like that.

And I imagine in this room this morning, some of you have found very little reason to celebrate for quite some time.

- The doctor's visit resulted in the news you most feared.
- Your husband told you—in front of the children no less—that he just couldn't keep up the charade anymore.
- The faith you have always held so dearly—the same faith that is legendary in your neighborhood, and to everyone who knows your name—has been slowly slipping through your fingers...and you've been holding that secret for so very long.

And you have said to yourself, "What resurrection joy are you talking about? I must have missed it. Or it must have missed me. Because nothing worth celebrating has found its way to my home in quite a while."

I am moved by the words of Walt Whitman, penned in 1892:²

"Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd with the foolish,
Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)
Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew'd,
Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,
Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,
The question, O me! so sad, recurring—What good amid these, O me, O life?"

If the weight of the world has replaced the hope in your heart, then—trust me—you are not alone. And, in the wake of the happiest event in the history of the world, three

² Walt Whitman, "O Me! O Life!," *Leaves of Grass* (1892).

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51568/o-me-o-life>

followers of Jesus share your story. But it won't be their story for long. And if you are willing to accept the good news, it won't be yours for long either.

THREE STORIES

Our first story takes place on Sunday evening, just before supper, on the long winding road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. There are two travelers, but we only know the name of one—his name is Cleopas. Like Joseph of Arimathea, he was in Jerusalem waiting for the kingdom of God, only to witness the death of the man who would be King. Can you imagine their sense of disappointment? The anger, hurt, and depression? They simply couldn't stay in Jerusalem a moment longer. And so they begin their long journey home feeling so utterly alone. Jesus—the risen Jesus—appears, walking among them, but they don't seem to notice. Jesus asks the source of their heartache. It's that moment when someone says “tell me what's really on your heart” and your lip begins to quiver. You don't say a word, but the tears say it all. And then Cleopas opens his mouth, and we hear those three words that reveal the barrenness of the situation: “we...had...hoped.” We've all been there—let down by yourself, or someone close. And there is nothing left but the empty cauldron of disappointment.

Our second story takes place on Sunday as well. The apostles had given up everything to embrace the Messiah, only to have their hopes dashed by a Roman execution. And now—huddled in mourning behind a locked door—those same disciples seemed unwilling to let anyone or anything into their lives or hearts again. The Sunday following, Thomas would make demands for some proof of life—to see and touch the risen Lord before he would ever believe; he has since been labelled “Doubting Thomas” for all eternity...but his need was no different than all of his frightened, sad, and lonely brothers of the cloth. After all, they all would echo the words of some Greeks in John 12 who came up to the festival and asked of Philip: “Sir, we would like to see Jesus.”

Our third story takes place on the shore by the Sea of Galilee. Peter looks at his friends and tells them the three words you have said many times when you wanted to forget the pain: “I'm going fishing.” And his friends, like those of Job long ago, respond appropriately: “we'll go with you.” Peter had seen the empty tomb. He had even been in the room to witness the resurrected Lord; but Peter was carrying a dark not-so-secret secret: 3 curse-laced denials were still fresh on his lips. Job's wife once famously advised her husband to “curse God and die.” Judas had done that very thing. And now, having cursed God's anointed, Peter may very well have wished he had followed suit.

All three of these stories end in powerful and wonderful ways. They all involve a personal encounter with the risen Jesus. They all tell us there is hope even for those

experiencing crushing defeat. And I want us to learn 4 important lessons from these stories.

CHRIST CARES ABOUT OUR DOUBTS

First, I learn from these stories that Jesus truly and deeply cares about our doubts. Maybe some of you were raised to think that faith is a house of cards—make one change and it all falls apart. That viewpoint not only leaves you feeling neurotic all the time, it dampens any desire to study and grow for fear that nothing will stay standing at the end of your journey. Or maybe you were told that to have doubts—not even to express them, just to have them—is a sign that you are not a person of faith at all. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Philip Yancey is a contributing editor of *Christianity Today*. When he took the role, he was told to sign a statement of faith “without doubt or equivocation.” He put the pen down, looked at his colleagues and said this: “I can’t even write my own name without doubt or equivocation.”³ It just doesn’t work like that. There might be a man somewhere in the world who lives with no doubts. But I would wonder if he read the same Bible I do. I read of Job, and Habakkuk, Peter and John the Baptist—all of whom question God, and express real, serious doubt. But its not just them. We see it in the garden of Gethsemane, don’t we? “If there is any other way..” says our Lord. That’s right. Not just Jonah...but Jesus. Not just Moses...but the Messiah. At some point, in some way, we are all doubting Thomas’. And its ok to admit that.

In his book *Hiding from Love*, family psychologist John Townshend says that Christian people often either live with misplaced pride or else beat themselves up unnecessarily because we think of ourselves as “all good” or “all bad.” In reality, writes Townshend, a healthy perspective is to acknowledge that we are, at all times, a mix of good and bad.⁴ In his book *Contact* (later made into a movie starring Jodie Foster), Carl Sagan envisions an alien life form saying this about the human race: “You’re an interesting species. An interesting mix. You’re capable of such beautiful dreams, and such horrible nightmares.”⁵ I think that’s because we are not “one-sided” people. We are truly a mix. The same is true when it comes to faith and doubt.

³ Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God: What Can We Expect to Find?* (Zondervan, 2000). <https://www.amazon.com/Reaching-Invisible-God-What-Expect/dp/B0000547QK/>

⁴ John Townshend, *Hiding from Love* (Zondervan, 1996). <https://www.amazon.com/Hiding-Love-John-Townsend/dp/0310201071/>

⁵ Carl Sagan, *Contact* (Simon & Schuster, 1985). <https://www.amazon.com/Contact-Carl-Sagan/dp/0671434004/>

Do you remember Mark's healing story where the father just cries out to Jesus to "heal my boy." "If you can" says the man, "heal my son." "If you can" replied Jesus... "All things are possible to him who believes." And the father speaks 5 words that resonate with me: "I believe; help my unbelief." "I have faith...help my lack of faith." In the words of Josh Graves, I am a mixture of faith and doubt in every moment of my life; I have faith and doubt running through every one of my bones." And God uses even our doubts.

If you have ever experienced what the 16th century Christian author John of the Cross dubbed "the dark night of the soul," you'll know exactly what I mean. But what about when those dark nights go on for weeks, months, or even years?

The whole world knows the name "Mother Teresa." That name is synonymous with strong resilient faith. But when her previously unpublished letters appeared in print just after her death, the world was shocked to discover that "a dark night of the soul" lingered throughout her life. In a letter dated 1961, She wrote these painful words:

Darkness is such that I really do not see—neither with my mind nor with my reason—the place of God in my soul is blank—There is no God in me—when the pain of longing is so great—I just long & long for God. ... The torture and pain I can't explain.⁶

Some were quick to call her a hypocrite. I didn't. I found a kindred spirit. Perhaps you do as well. My friend Randy Harris likes to say this: the opposite of faith is not "doubt;" It's apathy. Romans 8 says even the best of us have no idea what we should pray for. There are so many things we don't know. So much that isn't clear. We do not walk by sight. But we do...walk. That's what faith is. In the midst of doubt, even with fear, we keep walking.

In the *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis describes the kind of faith that makes a demon quake in his books. A senior demon says to a younger demon:

"Be not deceived, Wormwood, our cause is never more in jeopardy than when a human, no longer desiring but still intending to do our Enemy's will, looks round upon a universe in which every trace of Him seems to have vanished, and asks why he has been forsaken, and still obeys."⁷

⁶ *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (Image, 2009). <https://www.amazon.com/Mother-Teresa-Private-Writings-Calcutta/dp/0307589234/>

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters* (repr., HarperOne, 2015). <https://www.amazon.com/Screwtape-Letters-C-S-Lewis/dp/0060652934/>

Mark this down. Christ cares for doubting Thomas'...like you and me.

CHRIST REVEALS HIMSELF TO TROUBLED HEARTS

The second thing we learn from these stories is that God doesn't leave us in our doubts and fears forever. Christ reveals himself to troubled hearts. In all three stories, Jesus finds the hurting, doubting, struggling disciples, and he comes to them. Cleopas needs to see Jesus; so Jesus walks beside him, and stays for dinner. To Thomas and the rest of the apostles, Jesus ignores the 'keep out' sign hanging on the locked door, and appears among them, with scars and wounds to satisfy their lingering doubts. Peter needed one last chance to say "I'm sorry," when Jesus called him over for breakfast. Whether like Peter in the early morn, Thomas at noon, or Cleopas in the evening, Jesus makes himself known to troubled hearts.

My favorite painting of the resurrection appearances is that of Caravaggio entitled *The incredulity of St. Thomas*.⁸ There is Thomas, with finger piercing Jesus' side. But his eyes tell the story. They are wide with shock, wonder, amazement, and just a hint of joyful excitement. You can almost hear him say with a faint whisper: "It's...the Lord!"

THE REVELATION OF CHRIST FOREVER SHAPES OUR PERSPECTIVE

And when Jesus shows up, he changes everything. The third thing these stories teach us is that once we see Christ, that encounter forever shapes our perspective. We simply can't be the same people we once were. Tradition tells us the apostles faced unimaginable foes before they left this earth; some crucified upside down, others shot through with arrows. But one encounter with Jesus was all it took for them to face the future with a firm tenacity that can't be explained any other way.

Peter is standing outside the courtyard, just a few hundred feet from where Jesus is being interrogated. "Aren't you one of his followers?" asked a passerby? No, I don't even know the man! Says Peter. 3 times – each denial worse than the one before it. After the 3rd denial, Luke tells us that Jesus turned and looked at him. And the rooster crowed. And the text tells us Peter was warming his hands by a "charcoal" fire. From this moment on, going forward, every time Peter would pass by a fire, that smell would take him back to the worst day of his life. Smells are like that. And Jesus knows it. And so, he reframes it.

⁸ <https://www.caravaggio.org/the-incredulity-of-saint-thomas.jsp>

3 chapters later, Peter recognizes the risen Lord on the shore. He jumps out of the boat and swims to Jesus—who is cooking breakfast on the shore. And, what do you know, he’s cooking fish on a charcoal fire. There they are again—standing eye to eye—and Jesus replaces those 3 denials with 3 affirmations of mission: “If you love me, feed my sheep.”⁹

Many of you going through very rough times wonder if Jesus will simply erase all your sad moments. That’s not his usual M.O. He does something even better. He reframes our stories so that our pain is not forgotten, but reoriented in a helpful, healing way. The resurrected Jesus still bore scars, and Peter’s denials were recorded in Scripture for all of posterity. But the smell of charcoal will no longer simply be a reminder of his worst day; but a reminder of how Jesus reframed his worst moment into a transformative experience: Jesus offered Peter a subtle form of resurrection. And he can do the same for you. In one of his letters later in life, Peter speaks of apostate people who do vile unimaginable things. “They even deny the Lord that bought them!” writes Peter! I wonder if Peter was such a changed man, that the former Peter was someone he couldn’t even recognize anymore. If you are struggling today, let an encounter with Jesus forever change how you see yourself and the world around you. Resurrection is what he offers.

GOD WANTS US TO DISCOVER HIM IN COMMUNITY

Finally, you ask “when and where can I encounter Jesus?” Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus; he made a special appearance to his brother James. But these stories teach us that in the normal course of life, Christ wants us to discover him—most often—in the gathering of his people. Psychologists will be the first to tell you that when we are sad, lonely, hurting, and broken, we need people. The alien in Sagan’s novel added this note for humans: “you feel so lost, so cut off, so alone, only you’re not. See, in all our searching, the only thing we’ve found that makes the emptiness bearable, is each other.”¹⁰

But the Christian gospel reveals more than any therapy research could convey. We need more than each other—we need Jesus. And it’s remarkable to note how the two are related. Jesus said “where two or three are gathered, there I am in the midst of them.” Paul’s favorite description for the church goes way beyond mere metaphor: the body of Jesus—the same body that hung on the cross—the resurrected body that stood

⁹ Taken from a devotional in *NIV Men’s Study Bible* (Zondervan, 1993). <https://www.amazon.com/NIV-Mens-Devotional-Bible-International/dp/0310915856>

¹⁰ Carl Sagan, *Contact* (Simon & Schuster, 1985). <https://www.amazon.com/Contact-Carl-Sagan/dp/0671434004/>

before Thomas, and Cleopas, and Peter—that body of Christ is in your midst today. For we are his body...the church.

When it appeared that the conversation was going to end there on the road to Emmaus, the pair invited Jesus home for a meal. But without any explanation, the story places Jesus at the head of the table. He is the presider that Sunday evening, as he breaks the bread, and blesses it. I think you have to try real hard not to see an allusion to what we do every first day of the week. And its when Jesus breaks the bread that Cleopas' eyes are opened, and he knows he has been in the presence of the Lord. "We had hoped" is changed into "our hearts were burning within us". Like Thomas, its on the first day of the week that we touch his body; Like Peter and Cleopas, we are invited to dine with Jesus. But we do it...together.

Look at the person sitting next to you this morning. Do you know their story of faith? Today is a good day to find out. As we take the bread, and give it to one another, let us share what the Lord has done for us. As we read scripture together, and share in conversation in our classes, let us be the body of Christ for each other. As we leave this place, we continue to be the body of Christ. And God reveals himself not just in stories, and in communion, but also in mission. We run back to Searcy, back to our families, into the highways and hedges—into Wal-Mart and Harps, into McAlisters and Autozone—sharing the joy of our encounter with the body of Christ, that leaves us in wonder, our hearts burning within us, our eyes wide open.