

Easter Sunday: Jesus's Story Changes Ours | John 10:1-18

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Have you ever been watching a movie with friends or family, when someone asks, *How does this turn out? Is this a happy or sad story?*

Especially during scary or sad parts, first-time viewers may need reassuring: *do things work out for her in the end? Do things get resolved for him? I can't handle watching this if it ends bad.*

And we all can probably think of movies we've watched or books we've read where a sudden event near the end brings a total reversal of fortunes, or a shocking revelation transforms our understanding of the whole.

And if know the surprise that's coming, we reassure the uninitiated viewers: don't give up on the story, there's something amazing up ahead that turns this from a tragedy to triumph.

Wouldn't it be interesting if we could do this with our own lives? Ask the author, *how does this story out in the end?*

Interestingly, for the past several decades thinkers have been explaining that people actually do experience their lives as stories.

"Making sense of one's life as a story is ... not an optional extra," writes Philosopher Charles Taylor, "I cannot know what I am doing without some sense of how my life first together as a whole."¹

Stories have **plots**: meaning, events are not random or fragmented. They fit together into some purposeful whole. And things are moving in some direction—they are not aimless.

And stories have **characters**: individuals whose identities are only intelligible because of webs of relationships and experiences.

I say all this to remind even the strictest materialist, who may be committed wholly to science as the ultimate reality. If your child ask you who they are, you don't answer,

Son, you are a biomass of tiny blocks called cells. Each made up of molecules, which in turn are made of atoms. In your brain a network of nerve cells sends electrical and chemical signals through you which create your feelings and thoughts.

No, you tell them a story,

You are bobby. You come from this family in this part of the world. We are a people committed to these ideals and this lifestyle. You are working hard to become a good student and good man, so you can take on a vocation one day and serve other.

That's a **story**—with a plot, characters, assumed values, and direction.

¹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 47, 50.

As we turn to the **true story of Jesus of Nazareth today**—and contend with the most shocking of events that transforms it—I want us to all bear in mind the story-form shape of our lives.

I want you to be thinking about what **plot** controls your story—what holds the events together in a coherent whole.

What is the most important **event**? Is there something that has or will decisively turn it from a tragedy to triumph?

And who's the main **characters**?—have you the friend you need?

For you, wherever you find yourself in your story—do you know whether or not it will be worth it in the end?

We have **four biographies** of Jesus of Nazareth, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. The other **twenty-three** books making up the New Testament continue to bear witness to his life and impact. Not to mention references to him by ancient historians like **Josephus** (ca 37-100 AD) and **Tacitus** (ca 56-120BC).

I. His Death: A Seeming Tragedy

Easter Sunday begins with the Women headed to Jesus' tomb—so it drops us into his story at the nadir—the lowest point.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb (Mark 16:1-2).

Our main character is dead. And for his followers, it was sudden and crushing. Just the weekend prior, they'd welcomed him to Jerusalem as a king. But things turned fast. Betrayal. Arrest. Trial. And finally, execution on a Roman Cross.

The whiplash for these women would have been tremendous. They'd followed him from way up north in Galilee, over a hundred miles as he made his way to Jerusalem. His death was more than the loss of a friend. It was shattered hope: the so-called messianic movement had turned out to be another farce.

So, we meet them here, early on Easter day, not living a triumph, but headed to anoint a dead body. I want to take a moment to consider their state here—at this point of the Jesus-story.

I want to consider that moment in a life-story when the best thing we can do, is anoint the dead.

Their act of mourning is respectable. Their dream has died, but they are not collapsing entirely. It seems they will fulfill their public duty to respect Jesus in his death, and so they go to anoint him.

It's a strange notion—**anointing a dead body**. Why spend your time and money adorning something that will only decay?

Here, I suggest, is a poignant image of what all of life is like if there is no after-life. In his Pulitzer-Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, Ernest Becker treats this tension for modern humans: we celebrate love, aspire for greatness, revel in beauty. But at the same time, believe everything terminates in death one day. For all of us as individuals, but also for our planet and solar system.

Man is literally split in two: he has an awareness of his own splendid uniqueness in that he sticks out of nature with a towering majesty, and yet he goes back into the ground a few feet in order blindly and dumbly to rot and disappear forever.²

It's not just literal death that frustrates, either. It's the death of dreams along the way. As people move through middle age, there is often a quiet reckoning that things have not gone as amazingly as their youthful selves hoped: maybe the career isn't what you'd wanted, the marriage is harder, the kids have strayed, or it's just hard to watch your body age, knowing its best days are already past.

I think for so many of us, we are like these respectable women. A dream has died. Maybe even a dear one has died. And no, we aren't wallowing. We are making do as best as we can—trying to keep despair at bay, and the looming reality of death out of our minds. We still build lives and strive for good.

But if this life is *all* there is. If dreams don't come true and, in the end, every single one of us dies. Are we not all simply putting spices on a dead body?

Is the plot of your life-story confined by death on all sides? Have you reckoned with the ramifications of this?

But Jesus' death is not the final twist in his story. There's another one. A real shocker.

II. His Resurrection—A Shock

The women reach the tomb, in the dime light of early dawn, and,

looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large.⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed.⁶ And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him (Mark 16:4-6).

These women, along with many others, will soon have experiences with the embodied, real, living Jesus. Paul adds in Corinthians:

[Christ] appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (1 Cor 15:5-8).

² Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1973), 26–27

All these **eyewitnesses** are part of what supports the veracity of the resurrection. The accounts of Jesus' resurrection were written down while so many of these witnesses were living—making them **refutable** if they were false.

And then there is the **multiple accounts**—Matthew and Luke seem to share Mark's account and another; then there is John's and this account from Paul.

And the **minor differences** in the accounts—Luke noting two angels, Matthew and Mark focusing on one; John telling us the women ventured to the tomb “early while it was still dark” but Mark noting it was a “very early when the sun had risen” (Jn 20:1; Mk 16:2). These are precisely the types of differences you'd expect from different people recalling their unique experiences of shocking, supernatural event.

If the disciples put their heads together to make it up, you'd expect the details to all match perfectly; and it's doubtful they'd have painted themselves so poorly in the most important moments.

But the veracity of the resurrection is only the beginning of our grasping of its import. Yes, it happened. Giants of history have believed it: Augustine. Thomas Aquinas. Teresa of Avila. Catherine of Siena. Martin Luther. Michelangelo. Caravaggio. Rembrandt. Johann Sebastian Bach. Blaise Pascal. William Wilberforce. Flannery O'Connor. Queen Elizabeth the 1, and 2. Millions today—poor and rich, educated and uneducated. Myself. So many have come to know Jesus rose, literally, from the dead.

But I want to ask how this fact *changes* the story—the Jesus-story, these women's stories, and your story.

How does the resurrection explode and transform the **plot** of a life story? Or the decisive **event**? What does it say about the most important **characters**? What does it say about how things **turn out in the end**?

Let me leave you this Easter with 3 brief truths about how the resurrection of Jesus shapes your life story.

1. You are at the beginning, not middle nor end.

The resurrection transforms a *temporal* story plot into an *eternal* one:

We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again” (Rom 6:9). Jesus proclaims, “I am ... the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore” (Rev 1:18).

This is true for Jesus, and for His people:

I am the resurrection and the life... and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die (John 11:25–26).

2. You're present experience pales compared to your future

There is great joy to be had on earth. And so much sorrow. But Scripture is clear, the best is yet to come.

For one, our present bodies are not like the ones we will get. Our present, pre-resurrection bodies, are *corruptible, decaying, and lowly*:

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality (1Cor. 15:53)

we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our **lowly body** to be like his glorious body (Phil 3:20-21).

The resurrection of Jesus does not make life *perfect* for His followers. Many of them went on to be beaten and martyred. Many of his followers today suffer with cancer, or mental illness, or paralysis. All of us age and decay:

Even we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit," Paul writes, "groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23).

So the Christian is able to enjoy the joys of this life, while also not being so surprised or disoriented by its hardships.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Rom 8:18).

We know that the best is yet to come. That our future lies in God's hands. And this gives us a hope that is indestructible.

3. The Most important event has already happened: Christ has paid for your sins, risen from the dead, and reconciled you to God.

4. The most important character is Jesus.

And finally, the resurrection tells us that Jesus is *alive*! He is not a memory of a great teachers whose works Christians continue to treasure—like a Plato, or Aristotle, or Seneca, or Ghandi. He's not a fictional character like Odysseus, or Achilles, or Hamlet, or Superman.

He is the living Jesus. Today, enthroned in heaven. But present to us by his Spirit—just as he promised: "Behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt 28:20).

And in your life story, the most important character—the character that finally proves to be the most indispensable and wonderful—is Jesus. Even more so than your mom or dad, or husband or wife, or best friend. Jesus pursues a closeness to you unlike any other.

Saint Paul—who only met the risen Christ in bodily form for a fleeting moment—would spend his life speaking of *union with Him*: being "in Christ," "with Christ."

Paul said "nothing can separate us from the love of Christ" (Rom 8:34-39).

The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus now lives to "make intercession for us" (Heb 7:25).

So friends, no matter what crew of characters currently occupies your stage—maybe some wonderful, and some not—if Jesus Christ is the most important, and if He is alive and pursuing

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you, why not invite him into your story today? Ask him to come onto center stage—the resurrected Christ. And turn your life from a tragedy to a triumph.

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