

## Two Responses to Resurrection – Ben Wayman

Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18

Easter is the day that we come together and try to make sense of what might seem to some of us as the Greatest Magic Trick Ever: The Resurrection of Jesus. A fitting question, then, for us this Easter Sunday is whether we are here today to talk about a magic trick – a divine slight of hand or a deceptive stunt pulled off by the disciples....Or are we here to celebrate Resurrection – God’s raising Jesus from the dead? So, what should we make of the resurrection and what’s at stake?

I would like to address this question of magic or resurrection by exploring two common responses to the resurrection. My hunch is that many of us, at some time or another, respond in each of these ways. After exploring these two responses to the resurrection, I’d like for us to imagine what it might mean for us to respond as Mary Magdalene does.

We could call the first kind of response the “Empty Tomb Response.” This kind of response is agnostic about the Empty Tomb. So. The tomb is empty. I’m not sure what to make of this fine mess, but I’m happy to leave it at that. This response has a lot in common with the school of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. As long as you don’t ask me any sticky questions, I won’t give you any embarrassing answers. We respond this way to the empty tomb when resurrection seems a bit too magical.

We see this response from Peter and the ‘other disciple’ in our first part of today’s Gospel reading. In this first response story, we meet Mary Magdalene, who is the first to discover the empty tomb. Mary’s finding of the empty tomb causes quite a commotion – soon, everyone seems to be running around like chickens who have lost their heads. Mary flags down Peter and the other disciple, who run like mad to the tomb, discover it to be empty (as Mary had claimed), but then return to their homes. No crazy questions, no funny answers. We’ll just call it magic and leave it at that.

It is important to remember that this first part of today’s Gospel Lesson is an empty tomb story. It is not a resurrection appearance. There are a couple clues for this, like for example, Jesus does not appear. But the most important reminder that this is an empty tomb story is that in verse 9, directly after John tells us the other disciple “saw and believed” John also tells us that “as yet they [both Peter and the other disciple] did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” And so, they return to their ordinary homes and their ordinary lives and politely clap at the puff of smoke and rabbit that emerges from the black top hat.

For all practical purposes, the Empty Tomb Response treats the resurrection as a magic trick. I say this because at its core, the Empty Tomb Response is willing to embrace the fuzzy perception that magic demands.

One of my son's favorite things to say nowadays is "Whoa. What was that?" He always says this catch phrase quickly and with great drama. Most often, he uses this slogan when he does something wrong and wants to suggest that what we saw was not really what we saw. For example, when he flings a piece of food across the table, he will say "Whoa. What was that?" He says this as if to imply: I have no idea what that was, and I'm pretty sure you don't either, so let's just leave it at that and get on with our delightful meal.

The Empty Tomb response is much like this. The response is quite content to leave the mystery of the empty tomb alone and attempt to get on with life as usual. But for John the storyteller, and Mary Magdalene, the empty tomb is not enough.

Where is Jesus?

We might call this second response to the empty tomb the "Full Story Response." The Full Story Response wants the whole story – no matter how painful, or embarrassing, or shocking it might be. Full Story Christianity hopes that there is a kind of beauty to the whole story, even though it might not be altogether happy. We respond this way to the resurrection when we're not content to leave things be; we want the whole story because we believe it is worth hearing.

My father-in-law is a story teller. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that his life is a story worth telling. He's sunken two boats in lakes (one of which he set on fire). He's also hit a parked car into a lake while swatting at a fly. He's head-butted through three windshields. He's also shattered a skier's kneecap with his head. He's set his apartment on fire while cooking. And he's flipped a Jeep Cherokee with his family on board. (Well, actually, they weren't all on board long; during the Jeep's flip one of his three children was propelled out the window and bounced off the Interstate into a ditch and lived to hear his retelling of the story).

Each time my father-in-law tells these stories, he labors over each detail of the story, from beginning to end, leaving nothing out. With each story, the heart of the story – is at the end. And more often than not, it's worth sticking around to hear how everything pans out.

After Peter and the other disciple bail from the scene of the empty tomb, we find Mary sticking around for the rest of the story. Mary was a rational woman, you see. She knew that bodies don't just disappear or vanish in a puff of smoke at the wave of a wand. There are a number of possible explanations for an empty tomb. For Mary, it seemed likely that Jesus's body had been stolen or moved by the gardener and laid somewhere else. But what about the grave cloths? Why would a grave robber or an ambitious gardener remove the grave cloths? Mary's curiosity and desire for the whole story, the current whereabouts of Jesus' body, propelled her right at the feet of the risen Jesus.

The dramatic heart of this second story of response to the resurrection begins in verse 14, where we as the hearers of John's story are told what Mary does not know: that the person she sees is Jesus. By doing this, John is inviting us to participate in the story that he is telling. When will Mary recognize Jesus? And what will she do when she realizes that the resurrection is the whole story?

It has become popular in many Christian circles today to settle for an incomplete story of God's saving action in Jesus. For some Christians, all that need be told of the story of Jesus is that he died for our sins and we should accept him as our personal Lord and Savior. For other Christians, all that need be told of the story of Jesus is that he was a socially radical and morally enlightened man who called on the rug the religious fanatics and self righteous prigs of his time.

But it is important for us to see that both of these forms of Christianity are couched in the Empty Tomb response. The question of where Jesus is now and the question of the resurrection are not important details in the story that Empty Tomb Christians tell about Jesus. Accordingly, both of these groups stand on significant common ground because they don't avail themselves to the frightening prospect of new life and intimate friendship that the resurrection makes possible.

But for early Christians, the resurrection of Jesus was an essential detail in telling the story of Jesus. While Mary may have been the first Full Story Christian to concern herself with the whole story of Jesus, she was certainly not the last. In fact, in the very next story of John's Gospel, we read how the disciples, and presumably Peter and the 'other disciple', are confronted with the whole story of Jesus, as Jesus appears to them while they are in hiding.

In our reading today from Acts, we encounter Peter, the Empty Tomb Christian turned Full Story Christian, confessing the whole story of God's saving action in Jesus to the Gentile household of Cornelius. Here Peter states that the whole story is not just the life and death of Jesus, but the resurrection and appearance of Jesus as well. It is striking how in the book of Acts, the primary content of the Apostles' preaching is this whole story of Jesus; yes, he was killed, but he was also raised from the dead.

This whole story is the good news that Paul is talking about at the beginning of the fifteenth chapter in his letter to the Corinthians. Here we find Paul, a man who previously persecuted Full Story Christians, now sharing their story and insisting that everything hangs on the resurrection. He, like Peter, tells the whole story – that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised, and that he appeared.

In fact, the resurrection is so crucial for Paul, that he spends all of chapter 15 discussing it; first, talking about the resurrection of Christ, then our resurrection, and finally our bodily resurrection. For Paul, if Jesus has not been raised from the dead, we have no hope in being raised ourselves. Paul understands the Resurrection as the lynch pin of the Christian faith and our hope of salvation.

What Paul helps us see is that Jesus' resurrection has launched a new world of possibility that is at the heart of God's action to save the world. In chapter 15, verse 14, Paul goes so far as to state: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." In other words, if this part of the story isn't told, the bit on the resurrection, it is not a story worth telling and the Christian life is not a life worth living. You might as well take up magic shows with bunnies and top hats and beautiful assistants. For Paul, Everything hangs on the resurrection.

But what John helps us see is that it's not just that everything hangs on the resurrection. Through Mary's response, John shows us that the resurrection itself is everything. The resurrection has turned the world upside down and right side up. The story of the resurrection is an extremely dangerous story. It's dangerous because everything you thought was true about the world has been called into question and exposed as an illusion. Money, Prestige and Power don't rule the world after all. Death is no longer a given. The resurrection demonstrates that God is creating a new world, a world that runs on a logic governed by Life and Love and God and not Death and Debt and the Devil.

What Mary discovers when Jesus calls her by name is that the world she once knew no longer exists. Mary used to know that people didn't get raised from the dead. But now that Mary has seen Jesus, raised from the dead, she knows that new life is possible even in the most despairing of circumstances. When Mary recognizes Jesus, she sees that a whole new world has been born and her own life will never again look the same.

This, I think, epitomizes what I am calling today the two responses to the Resurrection. The Empty Tomb Response may indeed suggest that something has happened to Jesus, but it is not clear whether resurrection or a robbery is to blame for the empty tomb. Accordingly, it is unclear how an empty tomb actually impacts our lives, much less the world. The Full Story Response, on the other hand, insists resurrection has occurred because by sticking around for the whole story, we come face to face with the risen Lord. When Mary sees Jesus, she realizes that everything, all of creation, has been transformed.

So what Mary finds is that this new world means new possibility, and the resurrection is just the beginning. What Mary finds, what really makes her heart sing, is that Jesus' resurrection makes possible a new kind of friendship with God. Raised from the dead, Jesus invites Mary into a closer relationship with God than she could have ever imagined. In saying that he is "ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God," Jesus communicates that Mary's relationship with God has been forever changed. Jesus' father has become Mary's father.

Easter marks the day in the Christian year when we celebrate Resurrection and the reality that Jesus' father has become YOUR father and MY father. By raising Jesus from the dead, God adopts us as his family and draws us nearer to Jesus, the very heart of God. By raising Jesus

from the dead, God has launched a new world and invited us to be his friends. Through the resurrection, God has changed everything.

May we be a people who are courageous enough to embrace the whole story of God's reckless love and wild power to defeat death and make us his children. And may we be a people who can see God face to face and confess with Mary, "We have seen the Lord." Amen.