



## *“Good News”*

Luke 24:1-12; Acts 10:34-43

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Easter Sunday

In the fall of 1960, a federal judge ordered the New Orleans schools to desegregate. On November 14, four black girls, all first graders, entered the all-white New Orleans school system. One of the girls, Ruby Bridges, entered Frantz School. The entire white school population boycotted the school. Ruby attended first grade all alone.

Each morning and afternoon, a mob of angry whites waited outside the school for her. They greeted Ruby with jeers, death threats, and language salty even by adult standards. They spat on her and cursed her. Ruby was six years old.

The New Orleans police department refused to protect Ruby. Two federal marshalls accompanied Ruby through the taunting mob every day.

Dr. Robert Coles, a young Harvard-trained psychiatrist, was in charge of an army psychiatric hospital in nearby Biloxi, Mississippi. His specialty was childhood stress. He asked for permission to speak to Ruby Bridges, her family, and her teacher. What he heard astonished him.

He wrote about his experience in an article titled, “The Inexplicable Prayers of Ruby Bridges.” Dr. Coles was surprised that Ruby seemed to be at peace. She was sleeping well and eating well. Her parents, illiterate former sharecroppers, were equally calm under what seemed to be incredible strain. None of the Bridges family complained.

Ruby’s teacher mentioned to Coles that she was a cheerful, though lonely, student. She also mentioned that when Ruby passed through the cursing mob outside the school, she seemed to be talking to them.

Coles asked Ruby what she was saying. Ruby told him she was praying for them.

“Why?” Dr. Coles asked.

“Because they need it,” Ruby replied.

When Coles told this to Ruby’s mother, she replied that she’d told Ruby to pray for them. Their Sunday School lesson a few weeks before was Jesus’ instruction to pray for one’s enemies. Coles talked to the pastor of the family’s Baptist Church who told him that he prayed for their white abusers every Sunday.

Coles, who later won a Pulitzer Prize for his account of the desegregation of New Orleans, ended the article with these words:

What does this leave us with? The great paradox that Christ reminded us about is that sometimes those who are lonely and hurt and vulnerable – meek, to use the word – are touched by grace and can show the most extraordinary kind of dignity, and in a sense, inherit not only the next

world, but even at times moments of this one. We who have so much knowledge and money and power look on confused, trying to mobilize the intellect, to figure things out. It is not so figurable, is it? These things are mysteries. As Flannery O'Connor said, 'Mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind.'

Some things lie beyond ordinary understanding and must, therefore, remain a mystery. Easter is one of those mysteries. The very idea of resurrection strains credulity. For what it's worth, the first response of Jesus' disciples was disbelief.

Yet here we are on Easter morning 2,000 years later. Churches are packed. Easter is the biggest Sunday of the church year. Once again we're here to hear a story too large for rational discourse. It is, after all, a story, and we surround the old story with Easter lilies, powerful hymns, brass choirs, grand organ accompaniment, and inspiring choral anthems.

We crowd into churches to be part of something that lies beyond us. John Buchanan, Minister of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago and Publisher of *Christian Century* writes:

This truth is so big that not one of us is up to understanding it by ourselves; we celebrate with hymns because we can sing more than we can say, and with flowers, eloquent bearers of creation's beauty. We gather to celebrate the goodness of life – of our lives and God's gracious, unending presence with us.

We preachers who are entrusted with the retelling of the story are happy for the help. Our advisors encourage us to resist the temptation to explain Easter, to keep it simple, and let the story do the work. Easter isn't so much about explanation. Instead the church "performs" Easter. We "enact" it annually. Easter is one of the primary ways Christians "experience" the crossroad of time and eternity. Easter lies beyond us, yet touches the deepest part of our beings with mysterious power.

The power of the Easter story cannot be understood apart from Good Friday. The disciples were still in profound shock Sunday morning. The women from Galilee who'd followed Jesus all the way to the cross had seen what human eyes should never witness. On Friday they saw the one to whom they'd given their lives, whose life and teaching had transformed them, and whose love set their souls aflame, executed. Their grief was beyond words.

The men fled long before the crucifixion. They ran for their lives. Who knew who was on the enemies' list? Their shock was of a different order. For three years, they followed him, supported him, and believed him. And in his greatest hour of need, they fled in fear. And now he was dead. It crushed their souls.

None of them expected Easter, and at first they couldn't believe it. Mary Magdalene saw him first, then the rest of the women and Peter. By the end of the day they'd all seen him and talked to him. They wondered if they were seeing things, but they knew one thing for certain, they'd experienced him alive, even if they couldn't quite explain the experience.

Everything changed. Each time he showed up they became stronger, wiser, kinder, braver. It seemed powerful new life surged in them all. The little rag tag band of disciples turned into an eloquent, spiritually potent community that surprised everyone who'd known them before. They surprised themselves. And sooner than anyone could imagine, the Christian movement spread like wildfire out into the Empire. "Jesus Christ is alive," they proclaimed. "He lives in us and he will live in you if you invite him in. God is at work in the world in amazing and unexpected ways. If you don't believe it, look at us!"

Years later, Peter was still excited by the Easter experience. He wasn't excited about his assignment: take the good news about Jesus Christ to a Roman Centurion, Cornelius. Peter had a low opinion of all Gentiles and of Romans in particular. Grudgingly, he went to visit one of his sworn enemies.

He proclaimed God's good news about Jesus. "Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by God," he said. He went around doing good, healing people, and fighting the forces of evil. I was there and witnessed it all. For his trouble, the Romans executed him but God raised him up. I witnessed that too. Believe that and believe in him, and you become part of God's new order on earth."

To Peter's surprise, Cornelius believed and as a consequence, Peter, Cornelius and his household experienced a little Pentecost – the power of God touched them all. "I get it, God," Peter said. This good news is for everyone, no exceptions, even our enemies."

Peter grew that day as the power of the resurrection moved him to a larger understanding of himself, the world and God. All human boundaries are erased by this good news. God is creating one new people.

For 2,000 years now, the church has gathered on the anniversary of Easter to reenact the story and to experience its power. Here we are on a day not quite like any other. Part of the difference is that all of us are here, and part of the difference is that Jesus Christ is here. That's what he promised long ago. "When you meet in my name, I am there." Just like Easter morning.

Our celebration of Easter points to a large and life-changing truth. Easter proclaims boldly that God intrudes into our world – our often dark Good Friday world – and injects life, divine life, into it.

It's not some automatic "*deus ex machina*." The struggle of divine life in this fallen world is long, hard and tiresome. And it begins in us. Spiritual and moral resurrections happen. How else do you explain the inexplicable life of little Ruby Bridges? She is witness to the resurrection.

Toward the end of his life, Ted Kennedy shared his life with Jonathan Karp, who helped the Senator write his autobiography. Karp asked Kennedy if they could get beyond the facts and events of his life to his inner life, how he felt about himself, and how he coped with such fame, loss, and adversity. Senator Kennedy said he was tired and went upstairs to rest.

An hour later he returned. For a long time, he described how the deaths of his brothers affected him and how his faith sustained him through it all. It was his belief in the resurrection more than anything that sustained his hope through those years, he said. He is witness to the resurrection.

Easter, then and now, is witness to a God who won't give up on this world – or on us. Easter declares that God is committed to this world – and to us – and is equally committed to redeeming this real world by redeeming people like us and turning us loose in the world.

Easter is a declaration of hope in an often hopeless world. Hope, not in ourselves or hope in hope, but hope in the God who raised Jesus from the dead and who promised to give us new and renewed lives.

Like many modern people, Lisa Miller has a problem with Easter. Preparing to write a book on heaven, Lisa interviewed Jon Levenson, a Jewish scholar who teaches at Harvard. Levenson is leading a movement in to bring the idea of resurrection back into mainline Judaism. Levenson told Miller that belief in the resurrection is, indeed, a radical idea. It's not provable by ordinary methods. It is, he said a supernatural event, a special act of grace or kindness on God's part.

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Miller's response is helpful. She's still not sure about Easter, but, she adds, "I do, however, leave the door open a crack for radical acts of grace and kindness – and for humbling ourselves before all that we don't understand."

Easter bears witness to God's gracious intrusion into our world. So, listen to the story. It tells of a God who creates a whole new world. And a God who does it by creating new men, women and children – by the power of the resurrection.

Amen.

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