

EASTER FAITH AND DOUBT

Scripture: Matthew 28:1-9, 16-20

In Donald Miller's book *Blue Like Jazz* there is a chapter on faith. You might not expect a book called *Blue Like Jazz* to be about religion, but it is. And the chapter on faith begins with these words:

The goofy thing about Christian faith is that you believe it and don't believe it at the same time. ... I believe in Jesus; I believe He is the Son of God, but every time I sit down to explain this to somebody I feel like a palm reader, like somebody who works at a circus or a kid who is always making things up or somebody at a Star Trek convention who hasn't figured out that the show isn't real (p. 51).

The goofy thing about the Christian faith is that you can believe it and not believe it at the same time. Matthew understands that. After Jesus' resurrection the disciples go to a mountain in Galilee to which Jesus directed them, and verse 17 says, "When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted." In Greek the verse is even more surprising. It says literally, "Seeing him they worshiped, but they doubted." The Christian faith is something you can believe and not believe at the same time.

Donald Miller tells about a conversation he had with a friend from Reed College named Laura. Laura came to him obviously distraught. She said,

"I feel like He is after me, Don."

"Who is after you?" I asked.

"God." ...

"What do you think He wants?"

"I don't know. I can't do this, Don. You don't understand. I can't do this."

"Can't do what, Laura?"

"Be a Christian."

"Why can't you be a Christian?"

Laura didn't say anything. She just looked at me and rolled her tired eyes. ... "There is this part of me that wants to believe. I wrote about it in my journal. My family believes, Don. I feel as though I need to believe. Like I am going to die if I don't believe. But it is all so stupid. So completely stupid."

"Laura, why is it that you hang out with Christians on campus?"

"I don't know. I guess I am just curious."

Laura reminds me of the disciples. According to Matthew, none of the eleven disciples had seen Jesus alive before they met him in Galilee. The women at the tomb saw him alive, but not the eleven disciples. So the disciples went to Galilee *on the word of the women*. They had nothing to go on except the message that Jesus was alive and wanted to meet them in Galilee. So they went. Why did they go? Maybe they were just curious.

In contrast the priests and elders in Jerusalem did not go. They heard the news of the resurrection from the guards, but they did not go to see if it was true. Why? I think the answer is simple. For them Jesus' resurrection would be an inconvenient truth, so to speak. It would call into question the direction of their lives. The Roman guards and their superiors reacted the same way. If the resurrection was true, they did not want to know.

A few months ago one of our new members, Russ Lister, shared his story of faith in our church services. He had not grown up in any church, and at the time he got married, he wasn't sure he believed in God. But he also realized that his doubts were not just intellectual. He said, "I was denying Him because he was inconvenient. It's almost as if I had decided it was better He just stayed outside my personal bubble." Russ goes on:

Lucky for me God gave me an inquisitive mind. I always had those big 'WHY' questions hovering over my head. "Why are we here?!" and "What is the reason for our existence?!" were always pushing my reason around. When I was sure I had many of life's answers, these particular questions always came back to put me in check. ... At that point it was a battle between my willingness to be ignorant and my eagerness to try something I never thought would come to define my life, to believe in someone greater than myself.

The resurrection is good news and bad news. The bad news is that there is someone in this world greater than you, someone to whom you are accountable, someone who holds your future in his hands. The good news is that there is someone in this world greater than you, someone to whom you belong, someone who holds your future in his hands.

You see, in the end it comes down to a decision. Are you going to go with the disciples to Galilee, or not?

Several days after his conversation with Laura, Don Miller got this email from Laura. She said,

I read through the book of Matthew this evening. I was up all night. I couldn't stop reading so I read through Mark. This Jesus of yours is either a madman or the Son of God. Somewhere in the middle of Mark I realized He was the Son of God. I suppose this makes me a Christian. I feel much better now. Come to campus tonight and let's get coffee (p. 58).

That's why we are reading through the gospel of Matthew in our church services this year. If you at least hear the story, if you at least go to Galilee to look, you can find out what Easter means.

Let me close with one last story. This is from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoyevsky. Early in the novel a woman named Madame Hohlakov comes to her priest, Father Zossima, and says, "Life after death—it is such an enigma! And no one, no one can solve it. ... I shut my eyes and ask myself, if everyone has faith where did it come from? They say that it all comes from terror at the menacing phenomena of nature, and that none of it is real. And I say to myself:

‘What if I’ve been believing all my life, and when I come to die there’s nothing but weeds growing on my grave?’ I read that in a book. It’s awful. How—how can I get back my faith? I only believed when I was a little child, mechanically, without thinking of anything. How, how is one to prove it? How can I convince myself?’

Father Zossima answers, “There’s no proving it, though you can be convinced of it.”

“How?” she asks.

He answers, “By the experience of active love. ... In so far as you advance in love, you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul.” (p. 60).

Did you notice that at the tomb the women reacted with joy and fear, both at the same time? Easter evokes faith and doubt at the same time. And yet, the women went and told the news to the disciples, and in the process of going, in the process of sharing the news with others, that is when they met Jesus.

The resurrection is not proved by being shown to you. Even the disciples who saw Jesus still had doubts. The resurrection is not proved by being shown, it is believed by being shared and experienced as you do the work of love.

- Ken Onstot
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