

“God Takes a Risk”

Date: Easter Sunday 12 April 2020

Text: John 20: 1 - 10

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The story of Easter Day, the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and God’s eternal plan for salvation all come down to this: what do you do with the empty tomb? Will you believe that He is risen?

In John’s version of the resurrection Mary Magdalene saw the stone rolled away and assumed that someone had stolen the body. She told the disciples “THEY (some unnamed / unknow people) have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have LAID him”. The presumption in this statement by Mary Magdalene is that Jesus was still dead, the body simply missing through some cruel deed. And so Peter and “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (presumed to be the author John) went to see. On their arrival each of them saw the evidence: the open tomb, the empty linen wrappings, the missing body. Yes, perhaps, the body was stolen. Or did something unbelievable happen? What’s the reason for the empty tomb? We see two answers in these two visitors. Peter saw the evidence and made no comment. His silence seems to imply uncertainty or lack of belief. Then there was John. He looked at the situation, and believed!

Have you ever wondered about how risky a proposition this is, for God to hang human history, salvation, the promise of eternal life, our relationship with God..... to hang it all on what we think about the reason for the empty tomb. But risk is a core element of the whole Easter story – not just for us, but also for God and Christ.

God taking a risk? Perhaps that’s not usually how you think of God. My sense is that we tend to think of God as being in control, as having a plan, as working out God’s will. That events unfold exactly as God determines they shall. But if this is all that Easter is, then the events of Easter become little more than a choreographed play, the players all being puppets, produced by God to impress a human audience of Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, and others like us. But if you think that the future of the Kingdom of God hangs on this one moment in all of time, then the idea of risk does creep into our imagination.

God taking a risk? God took a risk in the Son. In Philippians we read of Jesus, “And being found in human form, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on the cross” (2:8). It all depended on the Son being obedient to the Father. For obedience to be what it is, there has to be the possibility of disobedience. If we are talking about obedience, then there had to be the possibility of Jesus saying “no”. According to Mark, in Gethsemane the night of Jesus’ arrest, we find Jesus honestly facing his future. As someone who had been alive since the beginning of all time with God the Father, this eternal one Christ was now looking at his real death. We read, “He threw himself on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. He said, “Abba Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet not what I want, but what You want””(14:35, 36). God took the risk of letting this dramatic

moment depend on the obedience of the Son. And God could, because God trusted the Son to remain obedient. Yet it was a risk, however slight.

When it comes to the empty tomb, God took a risk with us as well. Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock wrote, "The cross of Jesus is God's true glory. Instead of using his power to enforce compliance, God travels the path of vulnerable love". God choosing a way of vulnerable love. We see this in Jesus' lament over Jerusalem as He approached the city on Palm Sunday. He said, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing" (Matthew 23:37). Jesus' desired to gather in all people, to care for and protect them. Yet it was not forced. The people had their own will, and (as Jesus said) they were unwilling. In John we read the well-loved verse, "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Our conversion to becoming followers of Jesus is not enforced, our beliefs are not pressed upon us. In other words, God took the risk of leaving it in our hands to decide what we make of the empty tomb.

Easter for God was a risky proposition. In fact, it still is. But not just for God, but also for us. We are called to take a risk as well. Today we stand at the tomb with Mary and Peter and John... we look at the stone rolled away... we look at the empty grave clothes... we see the body missing... and we have to decide what will we make of it. The evidence challenges us to take our risk... to take what Soren Kierkegaard called "the leap of faith". But with that leap, in taking those risks, there are promised blessings.

The first risk simply is to believe that Christ rose from the dead. Thomas would not believe. He said, famously, "Not until I see this risen Jesus and put my finger into the nailholes!" He remained a skeptic for a whole week, until Jesus appeared to him and gave him his opportunity. The risk of believing. But then the promise that Jesus gave to Thomas and offers the world, "Have you believed because you have *seen Me*? *Blessed* are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Those who risk taking the leap of faith are blessed by God.

The second risk: risk repentance, seeking forgiveness for sin. Christ's death on the cross was to ensure this. When Christ instituted the Sacrament of the Last Supper he shared the cup saying, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for the many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:27,28). Risk taking the cup, and acknowledging that you are sinners. And the promise: there is forgiveness! The cross has made that possible.

The third risk: give up your fear of death, for Christ in the resurrection has abolished the power of death forever. Ours is the gift of eternal life because of the empty tomb. The night before his death Jesus said, "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, and I go to prepare a place for you". And the promise that goes with taking that risk? Jesus assured us, "I will come again, and I will take you to myself, so that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2,3).

There is the risk of living the life of Jesus. The risk of being willing to stand out in the crowd and be seen as being different. The risk of being known as a Christian. At the Last Supper Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments". Well, that's a risky proposition as well. But then the promise. Jesus said, "And I will ask the Father to give you the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will abide with you" (John 14:15-17). Take the risk of living life my way, and you will have the Spirit's help.

We are asked to take the risk of sharing the Gospel – to tell others that the tomb is empty because Christ is risen indeed! Jesus' Great Commission was, "Go, and make disciples of all people, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit". But then the promise: "And, remember, I am with you always" (Matthew 28:19,20). Christ will stand by us as we stand by him in our witness.

Easter is all about risk. God took a risk, hanging it all on a cross and an empty tomb. The Son of God took a risk, in accepting death for the sake of the world. But then their's our risk: the risk we take in believing that the reason the tomb is empty is because Christ is risen. But, O, what promises! Salvation, forgiveness, eternal life, walking with the Holy Spirit, sharing the Good News with Christ at our side! What promises! All of them – signed, sealed and delivered – by a risen Christ! Maybe not so much of a risk after all!

Brothers and sisters in Christ, the Gospel's answer for the empty tomb is "He is risen!" Let us always declare our faith out loud using those traditional words of response: "He is Risen! He is risen indeed!" He is indeed! Go, in the enjoyment the blessings of God's fulfilled promises of Easter!