

DO WE LOVE GOD?

After Easter, what is our response? Do we love God?

I suspect that a whole lot of people love God a whole lot more than we realize or remember. But it is never provable. And it is always harder to show it in this world than we think it should be. Each generation that comes here is pitted against darkness, meaninglessness, coldness, inertia, and death in a thousand forms. This whole world would fold up and go out of business in a heartbeat if there wasn't a whole lot more love and worship going on than we sometimes realize. And, rightly, we keep thinking about the errors and omissions, and the ways we are still far from God and the LIFE God sets before us and calls us into. But not only is it true that God loves us far more than we have yet believed, it is also true that we love God far more than even those closest to us realize. And that gives us very little desire to rest on any laurels.

Often, we think about the lag time between three o'clock on Good Friday afternoon and the dawn of Easter Sunday morning. What must it have been like for those who loved Jesus and believed Him to be the Messiah? What must it have been like during those thirty-eight (or so) hours, knowing He was gone ... knowing it shouldn't have turned out that way ... knowing they had cared far more than they had shown? You know how we turn things over in our minds after anything important happens, especially if something has gone wrong - especially if someone we love has been hurt. We replay things the way they might have been, and the things we might have done differently.

For those closest to Jesus, many unseen things died when He died: hope, faith, meaning, purpose, confidence, truth, future. If we take time to imagine ourselves in their places, we can perhaps find some of the words, but they knew the *reality*. How do you pick up and start over, in an emptiness like that - in the utter abandonment - from such a frightful death and the perceived absence of God, as they must have felt it on that dark Sabbath so long ago? Do we assume we cannot imagine it? How we *wish* we could not imagine it.

From my perspective, there is another lag time in the great story. In many ways it is a similar lag time, but I rarely hear it mentioned. It is the lag time between Easter and Pentecost - the lag time between the

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Resurrection and our *hearing* about the Resurrection. Or, far more to the point, the lag time between the Resurrection and our *believing* the Resurrection.

The Resurrection itself - the release from death, the power of God to overcome what we had done - there are no witnesses to this. The witnesses see Him afterwards. The witnesses are witnesses of His appearing after He is resurrected. Jesus is alive, and the critical lag time is between when this happens and when we believe it. In the weird, strange way God has designed life for us, things are not true for us until we believe them. It is the most incredible honoring of free will imaginable. In it, there is so much respect for us: so much regard for our right to grow and learn and choose for ourselves; so much hope and eagerness for us to be authentic, and to be capable of love or evil or whatever we choose; so much respect for our identity and destiny that some people take it as evidence that there is no God. Surely if there is a God, he would interfere more directly - make us believe, control our behavior, stop all the mayhem. Why doesn't God do something about terrorism? Why doesn't God do something about the chaos in the Middle East? Why doesn't God do something about the lesser-known chaos and misery that never hits the newspapers but that we know about personally? But fervently though we wish it, and even pray for it, such a solution would throw away everything that matters about life - and everything that matters about us.

The fear and pain grow so great that we often wish God would change his mind and come down, take charge directly, and *make* us all be good. As a matter of fact, that is exactly the role we designed for - and expected of - the Messiah. That is the way "The Great Day of the Lord" was described in the age of the famous prophets of Israel. That was precisely the hope of the Apocalyptic Age, and what apocalyptic writings describe and proclaim. That was the dream of the Qumran community, and the Essene movement. That was what John the Baptist expected and lived for, and what he thought he was announcing. For centuries, we hoped and dreamed that finally God would take pity on our rebelliousness and evil and confusion and send a Messiah who would come and make us all be good. The Messianic Age would dawn - "The Great Day of the Lord" would come - and all things would be set right in Heaven and on earth. Wouldn't that be wonderful? Wouldn't that be great? We all can hardly wait ... well, except for me. I thank God every day that there is no justice.

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In any case, instead of the Messiah we wanted and expected, we got this anemic, soft-hearted, do-nothing, accomplish-nothing Messiah named Jesus. He couldn't seem to get anything right: Instead of taking charge, putting things right, and getting things in order, He told stories, worked a few miracles, talked about forgiveness, and seemed to care mostly about some inward change of heart. And He left the old world just as bad as when He found it - maybe even a little worse. He bungled things so badly that instead of straightening out all the rest of us, He got Himself killed. No wonder most Jews could not imagine that this was the Messiah. He didn't stop any evil; in fact, He revealed it to be even worse than we thought. He didn't bring any peace on earth; in fact, He brought more division and controversy than we had before He came. And certainly there has been no increase in prosperity, justice, or love on the earth since He came. At least not on the outside. And this is what we waited for? This is what we were hoping for? Praying for? This inept, inadequate, failure kind of Messiah? The wonder is *not* that there were many Jews who refused to believe in Him - the wonder is that *anybody* ever did.

The truth is, only those who "beheld" Him - who encountered the Risen One - believed. They came, through no fault of their own, to a whole new concept of what the Messiah was about, and what He had come to accomplish. And clearly we see them "converting" to a very different layer of hope and expectation, different from what anybody had ever hoped for or expected before. And they went back to life and back to work in this world with a very different light in their eyes - different methods and goals and purposes, and very different expectations. What discouraged most people did not discourage them. What pleased or frightened most people did not please or frighten them. But you know all about that ...

Meanwhile, most of the world went back to the same old ways - with some of us, like naughty children, acting worse and worse, as if we wanted to force some "Daddy" to finally step in and make us behave. And, very sadly (at least from my perspective), a large segment of the Christian church itself has turned away from faith in the Risen Lord and gone back to waiting for the old style of Messiah to "come again" and do it like we always thought He should have done it in the first place: take away free choice, set things right, and *make* everybody behave. It often seems to me that the church is trying to reverse the Pinocchio story. That is, we start out as real children, but the purpose of life is to turn us into puppets: make us believe, make us behave, make us be

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good ... and then there will be peace on earth. “I love you, but don’t take it personally; I really can’t help it.” Everybody does the right thing, but it doesn’t mean anything; we are robots, and that’s the programming. How often we talk as if that’s what we really want. But God will have none of it. The only alternative is free will (“The Fall,” as it is called) - choice, pilgrimage, and always growing toward what we really want and care about most. That is why idolatry is so devastating. False gods squander time and life, increase the pain and mayhem, and delay or even destroy our chances to be who we really are, or live for what we truly care about.

So the lag time that matters most is the interim period between the Resurrection of Jesus and our coming to believe that He has risen - or, put another way, the lag time between Jesus’ rising from the dead, and our encountering the Risen Lord in a way clear enough and real enough that we believe it enough to let it change our lives. That is essentially what’s going on between what we call Easter and Pentecost. People individually, and sometimes in small groups, are getting encounter experiences. Pentecost confirms for some, and initiates for others, a group experience large enough to move the Easter reality from a private affair to a communal reality. We call it the birthday of the church. It was no longer enough just to cheer the Resurrection. From then on, believers realized that together - that is, in support of each other - they were to pick up the mission of their Messiah and proclaim this New WAY to the ends of the earth (“evangelism” simply means “bringing good news”), to everyone who wanted it: Jew, Greek, outcast, poor, rich, male, female, slave, ruler. The false boundaries and borders of the old ways no longer mattered. And yet, they were not “inclusive” in the way most people speak of it today. What do you do if you know the Lord has risen? You get baptized - die to your old identity and your former ways - and come out of the water with a new identity, a new purpose, new methods and objectives ... and especially with a new allegiance and devotion to a different King. Everyone IS welcome - *everyone who wants to pay the price*. Today we keep trying to leave off the end of that sentence. Everyone is welcome - *everyone who wants to pay the price*. And what is the price, the price of the great pearl? Everything ... everything you have ... everything you are.

I have seen signs in churches from one end of the country to the other that say, “All are welcome.” And indeed, in Christ’s church, all *are* welcome. But nobody has a right to offer this New LIFE on their own terms. The truth is, this New LIFE is not open to anybody who doesn’t

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want it enough to turn in the old life for the new. Even then, many people start out thinking that it's about a behavior change. But behavior is always a by-product of the heart, as Jesus keeps trying to tell us. The real change is in what, and whom, we TRUST. Encounter with the Risen Christ allows us - invites us - to put our TRUST in Him: in His love, His presence, His guidance, His truth, His future. All life is shaped by what we truly trust. That is why it's called the Christian Faith. The old word for "trust" was "faith": what you base and bet your life on. And the Christian FAITH means that our TRUST is in Jesus.

I know you get weary of my trying to explain such things. But the reason this church keeps getting more alive and exciting all the time is because more and more of you understand and respond to our faith (trust in Jesus) on genuine levels. And I keep explaining it because I keep running into people who seem vague or confused about it all. There is much in Christianity that goes beyond all our explanations, and even beyond all comprehension, but that is hardly an excuse for us to shut off our brains and coast on mindless hope or superstition. As my father used to say, "If you're coasting, you know you're going downhill." But I digress ...

The interim between Easter and Pentecost is a time when more and more people are getting invited back into a story they thought was over. *"Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast - unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time [Pentecost], most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James [the brother?], then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me."* (I Corinthians 15:1-8)

This is the first and earliest real record of the Resurrection in the New Testament. Assumed or alluded to in Paul's earlier letters, here he lines it out. What is the clear or ranking difference between Peter on Easter morning, Pentecost fifty days later, and Paul on the Damascus Road a year or two after that? (Or any of the encounters in between?) There isn't any difference! *"He appeared."* That is what matters.

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I cannot keep from a side comment. Have you been rejoicing this past week? Do you take post-Resurrection history as much to heart as you take Lent and Holy Week? And do you notice how playful Jesus is in many of the appearance stories? After a period of terrible stress and danger, how do we usually feel when it's over and everything has turned out fine? Elated, relieved, freed - yes? Jesus is in a new "body," one unlike anything we have ever known. He is playful, teasing, having a grand time appearing to His friends. Perhaps He is also cushioning the shock, and of course there is point and purpose behind it. With playfulness, there always is. Nevertheless, Jesus is having a wonderful time. Mary Magdalene thinks He's the gardener, and He strings her along for a while. Two disciples are on the Emmaus Road, so sad they can hardly endure it, and a stranger joins them, acting dumb. He makes them catch Him up on the news, as if He has no idea what has happened. Then He calls them dullards, and starts explaining things they couldn't figure out. All of this before He lets them know who He is. You don't think He's having fun? He is milking it, teasing them shamelessly.

Thomas has sworn he will never believe. He won't be gullible like his friends. Why does the Risen Lord, who can appear and disappear at will, leave him in this state of lonely despair for a whole week, while all his friends are rejoicing around him? (The story of Thomas is a great one to ponder whenever we think the Lord is slow getting back to us.) Suddenly Jesus appears right in front of him. Of course, this is a serious moment; whatever you do, don't smile ... as Thomas tries to recuperate from the greatest shock of his life. And just because Thomas loves being so incredibly wrong - the more so because he had every earthly reason for being so sure he was right - don't let that allow you to enjoy the encounter. Nearly always when I've heard this passage read, Thomas' line is read in funereal tones: "*My Lord and my God?*" Do you think Thomas would be making a somber, formal speech at such a moment? Or would he be crying and laughing with joy and rejoicing? Is Jesus scolding him for not believing sooner? I can't imagine it. Jesus is carrying a truth and a power no one ever carried before, and I think He is enjoying it immensely.

My favorite scene is the Last Breakfast (John 21), with the disciples back up in Galilee, having returned to their old trade - fishing. They know Jesus is alive, but they still think they blew it so badly that they are out of the story. So they have gone back to work. Then they see this guy cooking some fish on the shore. And there follows the most delightful and humorous scene in the whole New Testament. There's no time to

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really get into it, but do you not burst out laughing to watch Peter? When he finally realizes that it's Jesus on the shore, he's very embarrassed to be caught back at his old task (like maybe some of us should be, if we have been called to something different). Peter is stripped to the waist for work, so he quickly grabs his tunic and puts it on - as if he can pretend he wasn't working. Realizing this is futile, Peter jumps overboard, now so eager to see Jesus that he cannot wait for the boat to reach land. Maybe he was hoping for a second chance to walk on water? Anyway, Peter is so nervous it's almost painful - until Jesus settles him down, decommissions him ... and changes his life forever. *Of course* we do not want to miss the magnitude of the moment. But have we not learned to laugh and cry at the same time?

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After Easter, what is our response? Are we still waiting for the encounter so we too can believe? The story cannot continue - at least not for us - until we, too, believe.

As we all do from time to time, I was thinking of the first and greatest commandment: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all of your soul, and with all of your mind, and with all of your strength - and him only shall you serve.*" (Mark 12:29-30) How different it sounds in the light of the Resurrection.

It was clear before Jesus came that this was the key - the thing we needed, and the thing we lacked. If the whole world would love God with this undiluted, excuseless devotion, there would be real hope for us. And even if the world never caught on, those who moved toward the reality of this love for God - individually or in groups - would indeed find a better and more meaningful life than most of the world would ever know.

But how different it looks after the Resurrection. It is no longer a commandment - no longer about "ought" or "should." It is no longer a theoretical axiom we can muse about or write pretty speeches about. That is what Jesus does to all truth, to all the precepts of religion, to all the good theories and the commandments. He makes it personal, dreadfully and wonderfully personal.

Presuming we have in some way lived through and participated in the drama of His Coming - the events from Palm Sunday to Pentecost - is there any possible way for us to refrain from loving God? Is there *any* way to convince us that we really "ought" to respond to something that

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has already completely overwhelmed us - that has already become the deepest truth, and the greatest reality, of our lives?

There is a story in Genesis about Adam and Eve, and how they disobeyed God and fell from the grace of the Garden of Eden. In shorthand, it is called "The Fall," or sometimes "The Fall of Man" (Mankind). And the result of The Fall is the great alienation of all things on this planet, called "the curses." Alienation is the opposite of love. After The Fall, humans are alienated from God - and in that state of sin and separation, humans are also alienated from nature; men are alienated from women; brother goes against brother; there is meaningless work and pain in childbirth. In short, nothing in this world is untouched by the curses. If you doubt it, watch the news or read the newspaper.

Jesus came to reverse the curses - to heal the separation, to reconcile us to God. His is also a story about The Fall. But it is not about commandments, superhuman efforts, pulling one's self up by the bootstraps, earning God's favor, or deserving life or success or eternal life. It is about what happened to Jesus, what that revealed to us about God, and what that *did* to us. This is about a different kind of "fall" - falling in love with God. If we eat from the Tree of the Resurrection - the Tree of the Knowledge of Love and Mercy - we cannot help it. We fall in love with God.

PRAYER

Thank You, Lord, for sending Jesus Christ to free us from bondage ... to confirm the truth that the longings of our souls have always sensed and known ... to show us the unimaginable depths of Your love for us. Thank You for taking such dramatic and costly action to let us know that the distance between us is not Your will or Your desire. We can still hardly believe it. But help us to believe it more every day, until all the separation is ended and we have true and total peace with YOU, and with each other, at last. These things we do pray for, and hope for, and work for, and live for, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.