

## The Crucified is Risen!

Luke 24:1-12

April 17, 2022

Brian Russo

On Wednesday, when I rather suddenly found out that I would be preaching today, the first thought I had for a sermon title was, “Easter Stories: Free-Fall.” But lest you thought it wasn’t hopeful enough, or worse, that I’d start off by singing Tom Petty, I went with the safer option: “The Crucified is Risen!” And I think I went with the better one too, because, after all... He is risen: **He is risen indeed!**

Growing up in Jersey, when I was a kid, my favorite theme-park ride was this rather crude attraction at Great Adventure. It was blue, I think. Full of steel, I remember. And from what I could recall lasted about 20 seconds in total, though the line and wait felt like hours. On the surface there was nothing particularly appealing about it. I mean it basically amounted to sitting in an elevator car, which once in motion, rattled backwards and then rushed you from the bottom of a shaft as fast as it could up to the top, until you were suspended 130 feet in the air.

And when you got to the top, for a brief moment it was actually quite wonderful. You could see the whole park, in fact, it felt like you could see the whole world. It was beautiful and inspiring and, strangely, somewhat holy – to have started so low and now be so high. But just as soon as you began to feel those warm and fuzzies, they were gone. For abruptly the lift propelled you laterally out of the shaft towards the edge, exposing an open bottom beneath your feet. And just when you got anxious enough about that, and wondering what sort of mess you and your buddies got yourselves into, a simple but demonic-sounding buzzer would ring out – ERRRRRRR -- and you plunged 55mph straight down, with your stomach in your throat, until you hit bottom again, where you first began.

That ride, my friends, was called: Free-Fall, and its tag line was: “Feel what it’s like to jump from a 13-story building.” I always laugh at that. I mean, what sadistic mind came up with that? And yet, for some peculiar and sick reason back then, I loved every second of it! And I wanted and waited to go again and again. Now, 25 years later, you couldn’t pay me to go on that ride. Not even once, not for a thousand dollars. It hits too close to home. I mean why would anyone, especially now, want to pay for a ride whose sole function is to rise you to the top only to suddenly drop the bottom out from under you? We don’t need a ride for that – not when that’s been the life we’ve lived, especially over these last several years.

And it’s not just been the pandemic either, has it? It’s been everything really. I mean, just when we felt like were turning corners and entering a new height of acceptance and inclusivity, the bottom has dropped out, and we’ve got “Don’t-Say-Gay” bills, and books being burned. And men legislating about women’s bodies still, and Jim-Crow era voter suppression, and xenophobia flooding out of the bigot’s spigots. We’ve gone from the Olympics, where the world (mostly) joined as one on a global pedestal, to the bottomless pit of a brutal war and an extermination plot initiated by a madman behind a 20-foot desk.

If it feels to you like we’ve gone into free-fall as a world, as a culture, as a society, trust me, you are not alone. And really, this ride of ups and downs, of starts and stops, of progressions and regressions, this is also quite sadly life in a fallen state, isn’t it? On this great adventure we find

ourselves in, all of us, no matter our age, our wealth, our health, will experience the valleys at some point. And often it will feel like the peaks are just the briefest of moments, and we're left to wonder how we've plummeted all the way back down to square one so quickly again.

And for Jesus' disciples, I imagine they had the same feeling. Our focus this morning begins with the disciples because Luke's account, unlike Matthew's for instance, doesn't feature Jesus. All we have are their reactions, an appearance of angels, and an empty tomb. Which suggests to me that today's word is not about the mystery, or a defense of our Savior's rising, but our reaction to it.

The women disciples (and yes, there were women disciples), note how they were first on the scene -- thanks be to them, ever stronger than men! They get to the tomb, see that the stone has been rolled away, and their first descriptor is one of perplexity. Then, suddenly, a couple of angels appear, and the women fall to the ground, terrorized by fear. Perplexity and fear, and with good reason: they had just seen their Savior crucified on a cross. *"Why do you look for the living among the dead,"* the angels ask them? *"He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."* *Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.*

An idle tale. And they did not believe them. Talk about a living word relevant to our times today. So many of us now don't know what to believe, do we? Reports conflicting reports; networks running stories from alternate realities. It can seem like all of it is an idle tale, for unless you've seen it with your own eyes, it feels impossible to believe anything anyone else tells us. And apparently the same was true for these men, these disciples of Jesus.

And yet, I've often wondered how **they** could not believe this tale...after all, this was a message delivered about the same guy who had walked on water, who had multiplied 5000 fish and loaves, who cured blind people with spit and mud, and drove demons into swine. Heck, Jesus even told them this was all going to happen, that he would be betrayed and die and rise again; so why was this story, of him coming back to life really any more incredible than anything else these men had seen or heard before? Just why then didn't they believe? My honest take... they were in a sort of free-fall. An emotional free-fall.

May we remember, these disciples, most of them, were simple folk living less than extraordinary lives, casting nets for fish on Lake Galilee and collecting taxes city-wide. One was said to be a zealot, most likely engaged in political anarchy, and another, a thief and an embezzler. These guys were not exactly the cream of the top, or particularly well-respected or well-liked. In fact, they were rather low of opinion, stuck somewhere in the basement on the totem poll of society.

But then along came Jesus, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and he handpicked these guys to be his own personal friends and followers. Just imagine then the rush they must have felt. Especially when he asked them to leave it all behind and follow him. And that they did! And along the way they saw things they never could have imagined. They heard things more beautiful than poetry. They felt Love more deeply than any dream could have conjured. But then they saw that Love and person -- their friend -- brutally tortured and killed, his body bloodied and picked over, and lots cast for his clothes.

These disciples who started so low, who spent most of their lives waiting at the bottom, were suddenly put in an elevator, and rushed to the highest of highs. And for a brief moment it felt like they could see the whole world before them, and all of life's meaning coming into focus. But just as they were putting it together, they were abruptly moved to the edge, and the floor dropped out. And they plummeted right back to the bottom where they began. Afraid and terrified of what might become of them, and what lives they might have to go back to, I imagine they were deeply depressed, and emotionally scarred over all the events that had occurred, and the rug-pull they experienced, and the last image of their Savior pierced by nails and a sword.

I think, in a great nod to human fragility, Luke here is almost writing a commentary on the affect of grief. For in grief, it's tough to remember what you've been told. In grief, it's tough to believe in good news. In grief it's tough to do much of anything really, let alone move out from wherever you've holed yourself up. And I think the lot of us here know all too well just how true this is.

.....

I've told you all for years about *The Leftovers* and you are all still sleeping on it! An incredible show. Season one is up and down; but seasons two and three are some of the best ever made for television; and yet, you still haven't seen it. For shame! It really is remarkable though. It begins with an apocalyptic mystery, but then begins to reveal that the real mystery isn't about that mysterious event itself, but how the people respond to it. And though it's stark, and bleak, and crazy, it is also wonderfully beautiful, and a faithful representation of grief, and an artistic depiction of the wells we must fall into, before we can finally admit to who we are, and begin to believe in what we've been told and who we can become.

And I sincerely think that the show can be thought of as a colorful adaptation of what happens in our texts here with the disciples, but especially what happens with Peter, who from an ordinary and simple life forged an extraordinary and compelling legacy.

*But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.*

No one had probably felt more grief than Peter. He, the disciple who stepped out of a boat to walk on water but sank; he, the disciple who exclaimed Lord not only my feet, but my hands and my head also; he, the disciple who reached such heights as being named by Jesus as the rock; and he, the disciple who fell to such lows by denying Jesus three times on the day of his death. This guy, who wanted so badly to believe and to become something great next to Christ, he must have been so terribly crushed not only by his friend's death, but by his denial of their friendship.

And if you've ever been in a place where the last thing you said to a loved one before they either left your life, or this world, was something ugly or unlovely, then I imagine you know all too well what Peter must have felt, and how painful his guilt and his grief must have been. I sometimes wonder if he started to think that he was just as bad as Judas, and if so, did he hit his proverbial rock bottom? But I also wonder if it was there, when he was back in that valley again, that everything finally changed.

For in a whirlwind the door flung open and the women, out of breath, told him the news of Jesus' rising. Bursting out of the house he runs to the tomb to see if it could possibly be true, and when he gets there, he stops and looks in. Then he goes home, amazed at what has happened. That's all we get in the way of details from Luke, but I'd like to imagine that in the space in between Peter looking in, and then going home, he recognized the incredible significance of all the events now before him.

That after rising to the top, and being called the rock, he was now greeted by the symbol of an empty rock, an empty tomb. As if to say, Peter, ye of little faith, all you've ever needed to do to understand was to empty yourself. Empty yourself of all that guilt, of all your grief, of all those blocks that get in the way of your belief and your hope. But now that you've finally done that, and that you've run towards your faith, and the stone is rolled away, you're ready. You're ready to fully let me in. To be amazed. To rise to new and unforeseen heights. And from here on, my friends, Peter does just that, as he emerges from a confused student and anxious disciple into a convinced teacher and confident apostle of the faith.

You know, at seminary, I was often surprised when hearing that so many of my colleague's faith-call narratives began in a moment of tragedy. In loss. That in a moment when they felt alone or confused or wayward, that's when they found God. But now, I think I get that. When you've been in a place where you've got nothing else to lose because you've got no one else to trust in, it's there that you're often ready to take the leap of faith without seeing the floor below. And I think that's why Jesus asks us to leave everything behind and follow him, because so much of everything else in life has us worried about the floor, rather than opening our eyes to what's above, and that divine presence that's been with us for the long haul.

Rudolph Bultmann, that great theologian with a great, great name, says: to believe in the resurrection is to believe in the redemptive significance of the cross for one's own life. And that the crucified one is the risen one, and that the scars he bore, were for the scars we have. And those scars, like his, will be healed.

The Easter story then, my friends is powerful not just because life rises from physical death, but that all renewal and progress and healing is attainable through Him. So even if today democracy feels nailed to a cross; or even if tomorrow health mandates roll us back into a cave; or even if next week you're just over it all and feeling sick with your stomach in your throat; the gospel promises that hope will rise again.

Because nothing, nothing in this life, neither sword, peril, virus, or grief, can ever separate us from the love of God that is victorious even over the grave. The great good news then of today is that no matter how many times you have fallen, or how many steps you have taken backwards, or how many wounds you now have, you are in a good place because there you are also in Christ's place, who freely fell before us in our place. And so, from no pit can't you climb, and from no bottom can't you rise. Because with him who was dead and is alive forever, all things are made possible.

My friends, He is risen!

**He is risen indeed!**

Amen.