

I Can Only Imagine

Sermon preached on Easter Sunday, April 4, 2010,
at Heartside Ministry,
by Rev. Charlotte Ellison.

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Beloved of God,

I often find myself trying to imagine what it would have been like to be with Jesus while he walked this earth. I wonder, more than a little, if I had been living then and had heard stories about this young preacher, this teacher—this rabbi, who was traveling about doing amazing things, if *I* would have picked up and sought him out.

I wonder what I would have thought—what I would have felt—as I listened to him or watched him. I wonder what would have struck me, attracted me, turned me into a follower. How would I have moved from being a curious skeptic to a fan, to a disciple who could not imagine life without the Master.

I imagine myself being amongst his inner circle, lying about in a ring on the beach, watching the embers from the campfire flicker into the night while fish and vegetables roasted over the fire and we picked at fresh bread and listened to him tell us a whole new way of understanding our lives—our God, as our Heavenly Father, and creation as being alive with the Spirit of life that God gives, as coming to understand everything as holy and the Kingdom of God as bursting in upon us, about to put everything to right. Would the stars over Lake Genesereth have been brighter than I have ever seen them on the clearest nights up north? Would the heavens have touched the earth in a way I have never known?

I guess I think of those times, those moments, and see them through the only lens I have: my own young life seeking God, looking for direction and meaning and consolation and hope. I can put myself in the picture insofar as I remember the desperate passion around coming to faith, realizing there was a deeper reality than the one I had known, like a secret that some shared but much of the world was oblivious to—going about its business as it always had.

It was a feeling very much like being in love—in fact, perhaps *exactly* like being in love, but with *God* rather than another person. There is my frame of reference for looking at the Gospels. I think, I *hope*, I would have been turned on to God by meeting Jesus in the flesh—like so many people were.

Heady times, amazing times, exhilarating times, hopeful times when *all* things seem possible. Like the spring, really. How utterly perfect that Easter comes to us at the moment when the whole earth emerges into new life; at the time when we straddle the grey death of all the old vegetation, rotted and composed beneath a long winter, and suddenly shoots of impossible green are pushing up through the matted leaves and old growth. Tips of crocus and blankets of fragrant violets, grey buds exploding open with one rain into a canopy of leaves. It is no wonder that Easter heralds spring, with all its new life.

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But anyway, I imagine myself into the situation and ask how I would have felt, what I would have done. And that just gets richer, the older I get, the more life experience I have had. Even the painful, painful experiences bring blessings to this exercise because I *could not* have understood how the disciples felt, nearly so well before I had experienced the loss of a loved one. After you have lost someone who you *can not imagine* living without, and have stood beside a grave, inconsolable, you have a way in to the story of Easter morning, at least a little.

Although even that may not come close enough to what it felt like to be the apostles, the scattered and fearful vanquished, or the courageous women who would not leave the cross, despite the danger to themselves. Think of the brightest days taken into the darkest night of despair and you have perhaps a taste of the crushing weight Jesus' execution had been. The shock of an assassination might come close—the day JFK was killed, Martin Luther King was murdered, the day when the air is sucked out of your lungs and you learn the person you love more than life itself will not be there ever again. That place that is so much more than a hollow in the pit of your stomach, a place where there is a bottomless abyss before you, is the place where the disciples were. The place where every limb aches with the effort of moving was precisely where Mary Magdalene and the other women were when they left their homes in the twilight of dawn to go to the tomb and prepare Jesus' mutilated body.

I doubt that they had slept since his crucifixion. A week before, just a week before, it was to be the beginning of a whole new reign, the Reign of God. Jesus, a new King David, who was to somehow overthrow the tyrants who had held Israel in thrall, like the Nazi's in Holland or Poland or France. The Romans were surely going to fold, and be gone, like the stories in the bible about the sieges that were miraculously lifted in the night, leaving empty camp and scattered spoils of the would be conquerors. Jesus was greeted by everyone, acknowledged as the Anointed; people's shouts of Hosanna were still ringing in the disciples ears. It had been fantastic.

But everything had turned, like a knife to the heart—Judas had pulled everything down around their heads, like Sampson had pulled down the temple on the Philistines: Judas, one they had eaten with and slept with and traveled with all those days. It made each of them sick; I am sure, to think of the betrayal. And even that was small matter: the WORST had happened. Nothing could have prepared them for this crazy turn of events. It was like two planes plowing into the towers in the middle of the day, out of the blue, literally.

Their leader, their master, their teacher, their friend was dead, brutalized in a public humiliation that was a scandal. No one raised a hand to stop it. There was no rebellion, no

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insurrection, not even any skirmishes. It was a complete rout. And the disciples hid, waiting to be rounded up and done to in the same way.

Whatever life experiences you can summons to put yourself in the darkest place, I bet they don't come close to the feeling that lay like a black fog of suffocating depression and evil smothering the disciples. There was nothing left, when those women left the house, carrying their oils and fragrances.

They must have walked like zombies, lost in their pain. And when they got to the place, fearful of the guards and the leaders who might block them, things got worse: they had taken him away. They would be denied even the comfort of cleaning and caressing his corpse, giving him the last show of respect every human is worthy of, the basic human dignity that says HE was someone, His life mattered. They got there and their mind must have raced—"Have they put him on display or just chucked him out to the wild dogs to feed on like a piece of meat?"

That was the lowest point in history, I dare say. No time has been darker, as they approached the tomb and realized the stone had been moved.

From there, I think, there is almost no way we can project ourselves into their experience. If you have ever gone from the falling, falling, falling sensation on a rollercoaster to the shooting up, felt the organs in your body be pushed around by the gravitational pull of it, struggled to catch your breath and keep your heart from coming out of your mouth, that might be close. But even *that* somehow can't be close to the visceral disorientation of the world turned upside down to come in the next moments and hours.

It was confusing to them—you can tell that by the way that each of the Gospels tells the story: like a bunch of witnesses at an accident who all saw the same thing but each remembered it slightly differently. The main bits were identical—the tomb was definitely empty of Jesus, but from there, it is a little diffuse. Mary Magdalene is always there but in Mark, it is Mary the mother of James, and Salome. In Matthew, it was Magdalene and the other Mary who went to see the tomb, and then there was an earthquake and an angel descended and rolled away the stone and sat on it and the guards were still there and were terrified. In Luke "the women go and find two men who explain to them Jesus is not there. And they go tell the apostles, Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women.

You can feel the craziness can't you, just like when something *big* happens and everyone is operating in a certain "zone", a little shocked, a little manic, a little preoccupied. Some people find discrepancies in the gospels troubling—like when one version gives a slightly different account than another. I believe that those are the very moments the Gospel accounts are the most credible because that is the way life is, isn't it. First hand accounts

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are not like a movie, patiently shooting from many different angles, with flash backs and fast forwards and different perspectives. That is *not* the way most of humanity has experienced most of life for most of history. And the gospels are NOT written histories, although they record historical events. They are a witness, a testimony, the Good News, literally, and are a different literary form than anything that came before or since.

The four Gospels *all* are telling us one thing in no uncertain terms: Jesus was not dead in that tomb. He was somewhere else in an entirely, unprecedented new way, he was alive again. He had most certainly BEEN dead; not in a coma, not a deep sleep mistaken for dead, but Dead—dead like a box of rocks is dead; dead like a squirrel that is flat on the highway is dead. Dead as dead. And now he was not.

Jesus had been made alive again and the whole calculus of life as we knew it had changed forever. In a small way, I think it might be compared to the election of President Obama—hear me out. Because no matter what, no matter how his term goes or how good or mediocre or bad a president he might personally turn out to be, nothing will ever be able to take us back to the place we were in *before* he was elected. We forever know now that a black man *can* be president, that it is perfectly possible and plausible and right that such a thing can happen, because IT HAS HAPPENED.

That was ONE thing that Easter did—it opened the door to this new reality that proved what God had said all along: GOD is the Lord of Life, the one who gives it and the one who is able to restore it, even from dry bones, even from the confession of Job who said that ‘even though I am dead, I shall stand in the flesh before my God.’ Whatever we thought were the limits of human existence, they just were exploded.

Death is no longer the last word. Life’s horizon now goes from before we can remember into eternity, and it is a bigger leap into a full understanding of reality than having gone from believing the world was flat and the oceans fell off the edge into an abyss to understanding that the world is round, or that the earth circled the sun or that what we *see* is not all there IS, but that *the unseen is more real, more reliable more important than even the stuff that fills our every day.*

There is order and justice in the universe and that Good IS greater than evil, that the brokenness all around us is a temporary situation, one caused by the disruption of a deeper order, a more profound reality, or, as CS Lewis called it, the “deeper magic” that said Aslan’s death on the alter would not stand, winter would not always endure and that life—a life so real so vivid, so true, that makes the things we think of as life seem pale by comparisons—*IS* the REALLY REAL and *WILL BE* THE REALITY ALL OF CREATION COMES TO LIVE IN.

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We are pretty limited in the pictures and ideas we have with which to think about such a profound transformation. We can think about the best days of our lives, the most beautiful things we have ever seen, the most delicious foods we've tasted, the most peaceful and joyous moments we have known and they are still *really dim reflections* of what was laid out before us, before Mary Magdalene and the others, before Peter and John when they got to the tomb, to the many others to whom Jesus appeared in the days that followed.

If we call it a “WOW” factor, a blow-your-mind scale of one to ten, this was 10,000. Squared. It was –well, stop the world and tilt its axis--BIG. Big like the moment of creation itself, however that happened—in a big celestial explosion, a big bang that sent matter swirling out into infinite space; BIG like the moment when a sperm penetrates an egg and the DNA start their dance of division until one cell divides and divides and becomes a living, mewling tiger cub; like the moment we catch a glimpse of ourselves, as if in a magic mirror and see *who we were really intended to be*, the beloved of God, beautiful—no more scars, no imperfections, no weariness or disappointment, no fear or rage or bitterness—but healthy, vibrant, gifted, graced, loved, belonging, welcomed embraced, adored and cuddled in the loving arms of a perfect parent who provides everything you need and delights in your every accomplishment.

Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting? The tomb is empty. Christ has risen. He has risen indeed. And many *many* people experienced it at the time it happened and many, *many* more have experienced it in the years since. Each of us who have met Jesus Christ in our own life have come to the tomb and looked in, seen an angel or felt a presence, known in our deepest parts that it is TRUE—life is a whole different reality than it was before that moment, before that reality. Jesus Christ is Risen today, alleluia.

What does it mean? It *changes* everything. Now, there is no more condemnation. Now there is no more weeping: “no more crying there, we are going to see the king.” Behold, a great light HAS come into the world and the darkness IS NO MORE. Each of us is now therefore MORE than conquerors, we are children of the Most High. We are washed as clean as the driven snow. And *nothing* can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

One moment in the history of humanity changed everything, changed us, our possibilities, our expectations, our prospects and promised outcomes. Today IS the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice in it. He IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Now here is the Question, THE question of all of life: Is it harder to believe that Christ is risen or that your sins have been forgiven? If Jesus did indeed die and was raised, he has accomplished that which is beyond each of us: the payment of our debt, our reconciliation with God. It makes no sense, without that as the outcome. And *if* we are

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forgiven, what then can bind us? What can deceive us into forgetting that we are the children of God? No more prodigals, only joint heirs. And if we are forgiven, how are we then to live--not as people with no hope *but as people who are filled with hope*—and the power to conquer anything that tempts us or would entice us to live like slaves again.

The tomb is empty. *You have been forgiven of everything that ever shamed you, bound you, haunted you, diminished you. You are free in the deepest sense of the word and it is your great privilege to live out of that victorious position.* Take hold of that truth as you leave the empty tomb. Meet Jesus on the road and let him reassure you that he will never leave you, desert you, condemn you. **Live for Him and live like a child of God with dignity and honor. Lift up your heads and look up for his coming again.** Because we are writing the last chapters of human history, even today—even the empty tomb is not the last word. Go forth, and be sure that the Kingdom of God will come upon us all. Amen.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord,

We come and stand at the empty tomb. Each of us must make that journey; each of us must be convinced in our heart that you are the Lord of life both here and beyond the grave. Speak to each of us, we pray, in the words of faith that disarm our doubt and fortify our hope. Let us be able to give ourselves over to you in trust of the unseen, and certainty of your promises. And let us live out that reality amidst evidence to the contrary, doubters and challenges that would make us wonder if we got it right. We commit ourselves to you and the walk of faith you have called us on. Keep us strong and certain, centered in the certainty of your love. Amen.