The Difference Easter Makes

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 24:1-12

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Sanctuary
The April 1, 1985, edition of *Sports Illustrated* featured a story about Sidd Finch, a rookie pitcher with the New York Mets. Mets’ officials had clocked Sidd’s fastest pitch with a radar gun at 168 mph. Previously, the fastest pitch in a major league baseball game was 105 mph. What made the story more intriguing is that Sidd played very little organized baseball. He was raised in an English orphanage and was adopted by an archeologist, who subsequently died in a plane crash. He attended Harvard and studied yoga in Tibet. He was toying with a career in music or baseball. He liked to pitch in a work boot on his right foot and barefoot with his left foot.

The article created an overnight sensation. Reporters descended on the Mets’ training facility in St. Petersburg, Florida. General Managers of other teams called to register their concerns about the safety of their hitters.

Sidd announced in the next week’s edition of *Sports Illustrated* that he was giving up baseball. The publicity was too much for him. He would stick to the French horn. A week later, the magazine came clean with the admission that the whole story was a hoax. Incidentally, if you string together the first letter in every word in the article’s byline, it spells “Happy April Fools’ Day—ah fib.”

I recall one other April Fools’ prank played on the American public. Taco Bell took out a full-page ad in the Washington Post and other leading newspapers on April 1, 1996, announcing the company had...
recently bought the Liberty Bell in an effort to help reduce the national debt. Furthermore, they also revealed plans to rename the Liberty Bell the Taco Liberty Bell. The National Park Service was deluged with calls from irate Americans, including several Congressman, asking who had authorized the sale of the Liberty Bell. Taco Bell promised a statement at midday to justify their actions. The statement contained two words: April Fools’!

There is a curious connection between Easter and April Fools’ day. St. Augustine preached an Easter message in the 4th century about God playing a trick on the devil when he raised Jesus from the dead. Satan must have thought he prevailed when Jesus died on the cross, only to find that God raised him on the third day. Easter was God’s April Fools’ joke played on the devil. “Death is swallowed up in victory,” Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15. The last joke is on the devil. This is divine comedy at its best.

During the Middle Ages, there was an Easter tradition in Europe called Risus Paschalis. It is a Latin phrase meaning Easter Laughter. Pastors and priests would tell jokes during the Easter season to dramatize the trick God played on the devil when He raised Jesus from the dead.

This sermon is for any of you who are not sure about the difference Easter makes. I will address two questions to address the difference Easter makes in our lives. Did the resurrection really happen? Why does it matter?
Glenda read Luke’s version of the empty tomb story in chapter 24. Three things from this story stand out to me.

First, Luke reports, consistent with the other three gospels, that the first witnesses to the empty tomb are women. If this story were a hoax, you would not feature the testimony of women. The witness of women was inadmissible in a first century court of law. Celsus, a second century critic of Christianity, ridiculed the Biblical account of the empty tomb, since it relied on the testimony of “hysterical women,” as he called them. It would have been far more convincing to a first century audience to make men chief witnesses to the empty tomb.

The second observation I would make from this story is that Luke paints an unflattering picture of Jesus’ twelve disciples. If they fabricated this empty tomb story, I doubt whether the gospel writers would have portrayed themselves in such unfavorable terms. All twelve disciples desert Jesus at his time of trial. They come off as veritable stooges, dim-witted and clueless. We find them repeatedly jockeying for position and failing to understand Jesus’ core message.

Third observation: Luke tells this story in such a restrained manner. This pivotal event of Jesus’ life is recorded with such dispatch—129 words and 12 verses that can be read in a matter of sixty seconds. If the followers of Jesus concocted this story, I would have expected them to dress it up somehow. In extra-biblical sources, it is a common feature to embellish this empty tomb story. Take the second century
Gnostic document entitled the Gospel of Peter. Two angels descend from heaven in a blaze of light, in plain view of soldiers guarding the tomb. These angels roll back the stone from the tomb’s entrance to lead Jesus out. As Jesus exits the tomb, he expands gigantically, tall as a mountain, and is accompanied by a talking cross. These two giant angels, supersized Jesus and talking cross have no place in Luke’s gospel. Nobody even witnesses Jesus leaving the tomb. Everything is so understated—so unadorned.

Bottom line: the evidence for the historicity of the resurrection is stronger than any competing explanation; namely, that the story is a hoax or hallucination of the early followers of Jesus.

Now for the second question—does the resurrection really matter? It constitutes the “so what” question in today’s sermon. What difference does Easter make in my everyday life?

Jesus’ death and resurrection accomplishes two things. First, his death and resurrection becomes God’s remedy for human sin. Sin is any thought, word or deed that separates us from God. We cannot possibly reconcile ourselves back to God, so God comes in Jesus Christ to repair the breach. The cross is an ingenious solution to the separation caused by sin. It pronounces God’s justice on sin and God’s grace for sinners.

The second application of Christ’s death and resurrection is that it defeats our ultimate enemy, death itself. His
resurrection to life prefigures our rising to eternal life. In 1 Corinthians, Paul writes, “The power that raised Jesus from the dead will raise us also” (6:15). Death is now a defeated power. Death has now been disabled, like a bee without a stinger. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death.

C. S. Lewis writes in *God in the Dock*, “If Christianity is true, it is of infinite importance. If Christianity is false, it is of no importance. The only thing it cannot be is moderately important.”

Let me propose one slight alteration to Lewis’ quote: “If the resurrection is true, it is of infinite importance. If the resurrection is false, it is of no importance. The only thing the resurrection cannot be is moderately important.

Lewis’ reference to “moderately important” applies to survey questions asked on standardized tests, in which responders can choose from the following choices: extremely important, very important, moderately important, slightly important and not important? Moderate importance may be desirable in some categories but not in matters of faith. If the resurrection is true, it is of infinite importance. I mean, what difference does Jesus make if we occasionally consult him but rarely, if ever, follow him?

The first adult book I ever read was *The Robe*, written by Lloyd Douglas. I was proud of myself as a high school sophomore, completing a 500-page novel. This book also set the stage for my conversion to Christ a few years later. *The Robe* is a story about a soldier, Marcellus, assigned along with other soldiers, the duty of carrying out orders to crucify
Jesus. At the foot of the cross, he ends up winning Jesus’ robe at the roll of the dice. Marcellus becomes enamored with the person of Jesus. Later, he announces to his fiancée, Diana, that he has decided to become one of Christ’s disciples. Diana asks, “Are you convinced that he is alive—now?” Marcellus answers in the affirmative. Then she says, “What I feared is that this might somehow affect your life. It’s a beautiful story, Marcellus, a beautiful mystery. Let it remain so. We don’t have to do anything about it, do we?”

Yes, in fact, we do. If Jesus is alive, he has the power to change our lives in wonderfully redemptive ways. If you desire to become a Christ-follower, consider this sermon your invitation to open your mind and heart to the risen Jesus. Kids, did you catch the invitation to open your heart to Jesus? This invitation is simple enough that a child can do it. As you hold a heart in your hands, let it remind you of the invitation Jesus makes to open your heart to him. Opening the door of our hearts to Jesus makes all the difference.

The prayer in the bulletin and on the screens is a way for you to express your desire to follow Christ. If this prayer communicates your intent, I invite you to pray it silently as I pray it aloud. For those of you who have decided to follow Jesus, this prayer can help move the needle in following Jesus from moderately important to extremely important.

Jesus is alive. He will show himself to be real if you open yourself to this possibility.
Prayer: Lord Jesus, I invite you into my life. I confess that you died for my sins and extend to me the unconditional gift of forgiveness. I endeavor from this moment forward to live for you and follow you as Lord of my life. I trust that you will transform me into the person you want me to become. Fill me with your Spirit’s presence so that I may share this faith and love with other people. I offer this prayer with gratitude in Jesus’ name. Amen.