

“Seriously, if not Literally”

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When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Mark 16:1-8

One of my favorite illustrations for Easter is from the novel *Cold Sassy Tree* by Olive Ann Burns. The setting of the story is a small town in Georgia about 100 years ago. It is the story of a young boy, fourteen-year-old, Will Tweedy. After Will’s grandmother dies, his grandfather creates a scandal by marrying a woman half his age and a Yankee. Her name is Miss Love Simpson.

I want to read a scene from this novel. The scene is a conversation between Will and his grandfather. His grandfather is recounting a worship service that he and Miss Love Simpson had at their home and their subsequent conversation. As we can see in the scene, Grandpa is no stranger to controversy.

The story is in the first person from Will’s perspective. Grandpa speaks first:

“We held church up at the house this morning.”

“Sir?”

“I was the preacher, Miss Love was the pi-ana player, and the both of us made up the congregation. Hit was a real nice service.” He enjoyed seeing I was confused. “Wish you’d a-been there, son. We sang us some hymns, after which I talked to the Lord a while, tellin’ Him bout the week, and I then preached a sermon. Tell you the truth, I think it upset Miss Love.”

“Sir?”

“I didn’t have no words thought out, you know, so I jest commenced sayin’ thangs I been a-thinkin’ on lately—about the Virgin Birth and Resurrection and all like thet. I said don’t any a-them thangs matter. Well, Miss Love like to had a fit. Said she warn’t raised to think like thet. I said I warn’t neither, but thet didn’t keep me from thinkin’, and I ast her do Methodists interrupt and argue with the preacher or do they sit and listen to what he’s got to say.”

“Gosh, Grandpa. You mean you don’t think Jesus rose from the dead?”

“I’m a-sayin’ thet did He or didn’t He ain’t important, son. What’s important is thet when the spirit a-Jesus Christ come down on them disciples later, they quit settin’ round a-moanin’ and a-tremblin’, and got to work. They warn’t scairt no more, and the words they spoke had fire in’m. Compared to a miracle like thet, Jesus rollin’ back a dang rock and flyin’ off to Heaven ain’t nothin’.”

“What did Miss Love say to that, Grandpa?” I was real excited.

“Nothin’. I didn’t let her interrupt me agin. I said thet same miracle is still a-happenin’, right here in Cold Sassy, in July of nineteen aught-six. A crippled person or a invalid, or the meanest thief or the most despairin’ misfit, why, if’n he can ketch aholt of the spirit of Jesus Christ, he can quite bein’ scairt and be like risin’ up from the dead. Once his soul gits cured, no matter what his body’s like, why, he can start a new life. Well, next I preached about the Virgin Birth. To my thinkin’, the birth ain’t the dang miracle. Hit’s the fact thet a boy like Jesus was born to a mama who could leave Him be. Well, and then I talked to Miss Love bout Eternal Life. As

you know, son, jest believin' we go'n live forever in the next world don't make it so—or not so."

I felt awful. "Grandpa, you don't think Granny's gone to Heaven? She ain't Up There waitin' on us to come?"

"I like to think so, son. If'n they is a Heaven, she's Up There, I know that," he said softly. Then he laughed and slapped his hand on Satan's rump. "Ain't but one way to find out if she is or ain't, though. And I'm not that curious." He sighed, spat, and said, "Havin' faith means it's all right either way, son. 'The Lord is my shepherd' means I trust Him. Whatever happens in this life or the next, and even if they ain't a life after this'd, God planned it. So why wouldn't it be all right?" He looked dead serious, then all of a sudden laughed again. "You know, if'n I was a real preacher, Will Tweedy, wouldn't nobody come to my church."

"I would, Grandpa."

That was an excerpt the novel *Cold Sassy Tree* by Olive Ann Burns.

Grandpa, I think, better than most, understands the power of a spiritual story. He takes the resurrection and other doctrines of faith, seriously, if not literally. What is important for Grandpa is not the factuality of the event, but its meaning and power in the present.

"If [we] can ketch ahold of the spirit of Jesus Christ, [we] can quit bein' scairt and be like risin' up from the dead."

We read Mark's version of the empty tomb. It is the shortest of the four gospels and it ends with the women silent and runnin' scairt. But they did better than the guys. They ran away scairt long before and are hiding somewhere immobilized.

In Mark's gospel, all of the disciples of Jesus fail, both women and men. They deny, betray, misunderstand, and give in to their fears. They are not able to participate with Jesus as he loves his enemies and lives with integrity even at the cost of his own life. It is too difficult. They are unable to lose their lives so that they might find authentic life.

And that is how the story ends. The women are afraid and cannot speak.

Early Christians didn't like that ending and didn't understand what Mark was saying so they added a bunch of verses to Mark. But many scholars have the opinion that those endings were not original with Mark. That is why the New Revised Standard Version ends with verse eight and places those other verses in the footnotes.

So why does Mark end his story that way with the women running away fearful and silent?

In my view, Mark is not recounting history. It is history interpreted. Mark is writing to an audience. Those to whom Mark writes are scared. They, too, have failed. They are not sure if they are going to survive. Mark writes his story in the midst of the Jewish War when Jerusalem and temple are being destroyed by the Roman armies. It is a dark, dark time. Mark's story is one of inspiration and hope, yet it is written in a minor key.

Mark seems to be telling his readers that their failures and their fears are not the last word. The disciples of Jesus, who by the time Mark is writing 40 years after the death of Jesus, were also fearful failures and they had Jesus with them in the flesh.

But, the disciples eventually found forgiveness and power. After Jesus had died, perhaps long after, the women did find their voices. The disciples found courage. They experienced Jesus' presence alive with them. They caught a hold of his spirit. They discovered Easter.

They formed communities of service and sharing and non-violent resistance. Mark seems to be saying, "Have faith. Do not be afraid. Don't give up. The disciples were afraid and they failed just like you. But the risen Christ found them and the risen Christ has found you, too."

Easter happens everyday all over the world. People "ketch ahold of the spirit of Jesus Christ" and their lives are changed. Not only are lives changed personally, but politically, socially, and economically Easter is happening.

Movements for justice and peace are beginning to sprout up all over the world. In the United States, legislation is before congress to start a U.S. Department of Peace.

According to the “Peace Alliance” website: “The primary function of a Department of Peace will be to research, articulate and facilitate nonviolent solutions to domestic and international conflict.”

<http://www.thepeacealliance.org/main.htm>

Former newscaster, Walter Cronkite, had this to say about this campaign:

"What is quite clear - and would become clear as you go along with this campaign - is that you are trying, and I consider myself with you on this in every way... [To create] not only a massive but a basic change in our culture, in our entire approach to our relationships with other human beings... It's not a matter of simply getting another Department of government. You're speaking of an entire philosophical revolution."

It is impossible for me to read the gospels and not see Jesus as a revolutionary. Not a violent revolutionary. The opposite—a non-violent revolutionary—who demonstrated a new way of living in a world that was bent on domination by the wealthy elite through violence and indebtedness over the impoverished masses. Jesus was part of a philosophical revolution that started before him, lived through him, and lives still today.

As I read the Gospels, I find a Jesus who was executed by established authority. Why? Certainly not because he preached about a kingdom of heaven that was pie in the sky when you die. Certainly not because he preached only personal liberation or self help. Why would any political authority like Rome or the temple authorities care about that?

As I read the Gospels, I see that Jesus was executed for preaching political and economic liberation and non-violent resistance. He talked about generosity and compassion as political as well as personal virtues. He was not about escaping the world, but changing it. Through his parables and teachings he dared to suggest that Earth is God’s kingdom not Caesar’s, not the temple authorities. In our day, Jesus might tell us that Earth belongs to God not to the corporations and not to the banks and not to any nation.

If Earth is God’s Kingdom, then we are tenants, not owners. We are caretakers of Earth and of one another. We need to take care of Earth for those who follow us.

If Jesus were here today, I think he would say these things to us. I think he would say that it is criminal—against the law of love and the law of God—to poison God’s Earth, to misuse its bounty, and to waste life on war.

I think he would say those kinds of things. He would say them better than I did, but I think he would say them. I think he would say them to those who suffer most by the waste of Earth and he would say them to the halls of power. With the kingdom of God on his lips, he led a parade into Jerusalem the week he was killed. I wonder if he would parade into Nashville or into Washington today. I think he would.

If Jesus were here today I think he would speak and act on behalf of the Kingdom of God.

Too bad Jesus is dead and rotting in Palestine. Crucified by Empire. Parade’s over. Nothing left for us to do now but moan and tremble and live in fear.

And yet, Christians have a crazy belief. They believe that God raised this Jesus from the dead. Some Christians believe that literally. Some Christians believe that symbolically.

I really don’t care. You can believe it however you want.

What I care about is whether or not we believe it seriously and trust our lives to it.

If we believe it seriously, then the spirit of Jesus is alive and present in our lives. I believe that Jesus is here today. I believe that Jesus is here all over the world, gathering people and inspiring them to speak and to act and to believe that Earth is God’s kingdom and that we live in it by loving God with heart, mind, soul, and strength and that we love Earth and Earth’s creatures as ourselves.

Jesus is here waiting for us to “ketch aholt” of his spirit and to let our lights shine. That is what Easter is about for me. The Risen Cosmic Christ is here with us ready to transform our personal lives and our political lives. To help us to trust and not be afraid.

We are waking. Change is coming. The Kingdom of Love is coming. It begins personally and it extends politically. I will close with this poem:ⁱⁱ

*The Kingdom of Love is coming because:
Somewhere someone is kind when others are unkind
Somewhere someone shares with another in need
Somewhere someone refuses to hate, while others hate
Somewhere someone is patient—and waits in love
Somewhere someone returns good for evil
Somewhere someone serves another, in love
Somewhere someone is calm in a storm
Somewhere someone is loving everybody.
Is that someone you?*

ⁱ Olive Ann Burns. *Cold Sassy Tree* (New York: Delta, 1984), pp. 187-9.

ⁱⁱ Rev. Thomas Carrot. I found this poem in a Sunday school curriculum by Cheryl Gibbs Binkley and Jane Mitchell McKee, *Jesus & His Kingdom of Equals* (Santa Rosa: Pole bridge, 2001), p. 173 and others.