

“We come to the strangest story of all,” the Anglican theologian, C.S. Lewis wrote, “the story of the Resurrection. It is very necessary to get the story clear.<sup>1</sup>” He may well be right. The story of the resurrection is not just strange; it is strangely unexpected.

Each of the four Gospel accounts of the discovery of the empty tomb has details not found in the other three. In Mark’s version, the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with spices only to discover the impossible—the stone has been rolled away and an angel is sitting where the body should have been. The women flee in “terror and amazement.”

Matthew’s version adds an earthquake and an angel that terrifies the guards until they shake and become like dead men. John’s version tells of a mystified Mary Magdalene meeting someone she assumes is the gardener, whom she recognizes when the Risen Christ speaks her name. Finally, in Luke’s account, the women find two men in dazzling clothes suddenly standing beside them, terrifying them so that they bow their faces to the ground.

Each of those accounts is peculiar in its own way, but it’s not the unique details that each story relates that make the story truly strange. What makes the resurrection story the *strangest* story is what they have in common.

In every one of the accounts, the resurrection is completely unexpected. Despite Jesus foretelling of his death and resurrection throughout all four Gospels, when the day comes, not a single one of his followers walks to the tomb anticipating an empty chamber. Not one of them responds to the news with a “Praise God!” or an “Alleluia” or two. Not the women, not Peter, James or John, none of them says even an “Oh, good” or an “I thought that might happen.”

In Luke’s Gospel, people do not believe the resurrection has happened at all. Even after they have heard the eyewitness account of at least three of the women who had been followers and financial backers of Jesus from the beginning of his ministry. Now, remember, after they have seen the empty tomb, the women did not go shouting in the streets. Instead, these highly credible women brought their still-fresh experience to the apostles, the very community that has been hearing Jesus promise the resurrection for years. Our English translation has rather politely tidied

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<sup>1</sup> Lewis, C. S.. *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. London: Collins, 1979

up the Greek so that the apostles treat the astonishing news as “an idle tale,” but the Greek is a bit more colorful and far more dismissive. The word that shows up only once in Scripture, right here, actually conveys something much closer to, shall we say, “horse-manure?”

That is to say that the people who are in the best position to accept the news with great joy respond instead with the equivalent of “What a load. That can’t possibly be right.” That’s what makes the story so marvelously strange.

The resurrection story is about the love of God that is incredible until you experience it for yourself. At that, to Peter’s credit, is what he chose to do. Immediately after the apostles expressed their skepticism, Peter got up, ran to the tomb, saw the linens and went home, amazed.

Now, there’s a certain logic to all this. You see, until the resurrection, death always had the last word. To this day, there are countless people who still live as though death is the final reality. But resurrection isn’t simply a claim that Jesus’ body was resuscitated. It is very necessary, just as C.S. Lewis said, to get the story clear. God entered human history for the purpose of creating an entirely new reality—one in which humanity is liberated from the bonds of sin and evil and death.

In God’s post-resurrection reality, death is still a natural part of the human experience, but life is the larger and ultimate truth. Love and life are stronger than fear and death. In God’s post-resurrection reality, death has been transcended and shown to be a transition to be neither feared nor embraced. The resurrection allows us a clear glimpse of God’s love for all life and creates an opening for us to experience God’s yearning for creation to be free from the bonds of death.

No wonder our story is hard to believe. No wonder an experience of the Risen Christ leaves people speechless, disoriented and hesitant. Resurrection still disrupts our understanding of the natural order. Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it this way: “The gospel,” he wrote “is not a natural ‘therefore’ but a miraculous ‘nevertheless’.”<sup>2</sup>

If you don’t find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you may not be taking it very seriously. Or maybe you have learned not to question from those parts of the church that have mischaracterized faith as the lack of doubt.

If you do feel a little uncertain about resurrection, you are in good company. Biblical authors regularly point out that doubt, questions, even downright skepticism are not the opposite of faith, but rather an essential ingredient. We may never fully

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<sup>2</sup> Barth, Karl, G. W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance, *Church Dogmatics*, 1961.

understand the mystery of the resurrection, but we can watch for God marking our lives with acts of “nevertheless” in the face of suffering and death. Faith, after all, isn’t knowledge—it is *trust*.

We do well to struggle along with the rest of Jesus’ disciples; no simple thing to trust that in raising Jesus from the dead, God raises us as well, breaking our bonds to evil, sin and death. That is the clear message of this strange story; this strangest story of God opening the tombs of our all our lives; of God raising up everything in us and in the world that has been bowed down in fear.

So if you are one who accepts the resurrection with certainty, perhaps without really thinking about it, this (morning/evening) is your opportunity to question the awesome, incredible strangeness of God’s activity in the resurrection. Let it break in on you in a new way.

If you find yourself this Easter entombed by loneliness, let yourself trust that in the resurrection of Christ, God has already secured your place in a living human family. Reach out your hand and find them all around you.

If you are bowed down by self-doubt or self-hatred, let yourself trust that in the resurrection of Christ, God has already lifted you up and secured your identity and your worth. Stand up and walk as a child of God.

If you are buried by grief, or laid low by loss or fear, let yourself trust that in resurrection, Jesus Christ has taken these experiences upon himself and allowed himself to be laid low by them. Arise and go out into the light and life that Jesus Christ has brought into the world.

Hope is the first step toward your own experience of the Risen Christ on this (day/night). Our hope is met with moments of resurrection life that will continue until God brings the fullness of God’s kingdom. Until that day, God grants us glimpses of God’s rebuttals to death, incredible “neverthelesses,” if we watch for them and move toward them. These brief moments are God’s holy invitations to stand up and walk out of our tombs, upright and free.

This, the strangest story of all and no other, is the defining story of Christian lives. Consequently, it is necessary to get the story clear: Today, God has unsealed all our tombs. God is lifting up everything within them that has bowed down or has been cast down by fear. Raise yourselves up, walk from your tomb, take your place among the living. Today, Christ is risen and goes before you.