

Too Good to Be True

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 24:1-12

By 1840 European astronomers became aware of certain “disturbances” in the orbit of Uranus, the seventh—and at the time, the farthest-known from the sun—planet in the Solar System. This reminded them of disturbances caused by the interacting gravities of Jupiter and Saturn. This in turn caused them to predict the existence of another planet, even farther out from the sun. Various observatories began taking painstaking measurements of Uranus' movements. Over the course of the next six years their data accumulated until, in 1846, the French mathematician Urbain le Verrier could calculate the predicted position of an eighth planet. Within weeks astronomers in Berlin reported finding that planet, Neptune, within one degree of le Verrier's projections. French physicist Francois Arago wrote, “le Verrier has discovered an entire planet with the point of his pen.”

It turned out that quite a number of astronomers had previously observed Neptune, though none of them had identified it as a planet. Urbain le Verrier had made a sensational leap forward, developing new methods of calculation to make his prediction. (I tried working through a description of those methods on the Stack Exchange website but I could not understand them at all.) In Paris, Le Monde newspaper made le Verrier's accomplishment its lead story. The reporter wrote, “It is

almost beyond conception what Monsoir le Verrier has accomplished. It makes one ask, 'Is this really too good to be true?'"

Sometimes news does seem too good to trust. "Is this too good to be true?" This question lies at the heart of Easter. Can we believe it? Did Jesus really walk out of his tomb? As the Gospel of Luke tells it, the male disciples asked this exact question when told about it by three women. And now we head down a rabbit trail. This dynamic between the women and men following Jesus is certainly not the main point of the Easter story. But it does help us dig a bit deeper into it. It can give us a greater understanding of how events transpired. Jesus died on the cross mid-afternoon on a Friday. The Jewish sabbath would start at sundown, leaving insufficient time for the women to prepare his body fully for burial. So they put Jesus' dead body in the tomb without the full preparations. The women would have to wait for Sunday morning, the next non-Sabbath daylight, to finish the job.

It would never have occurred to the men to help. For that matter, it would never have occurred to the women. In a time and place that meticulously delineated between men's and women's work, men dug the graves or carved the tombs. Women prepared the deceased bodies by wrapping them in shrouds impregnated with spices. In the Middle East, for obvious reasons, all religions and cultures tried to bury those bodies as soon as possible. (Muslims and Jews alike still observe this custom.) Dying late on a Friday therefore made for the worst possible timing. Some scholars maintain the Romans intentionally conducted crucifixions on Fridays in order to deepen the pain

and shame of loved ones, who then had to delay doing what had to be done. Other scholars write that Roman records do not prove or disprove this theory. It does fall in line with their general practices but we will leave it at that.

Jesus had a (half)-brother named James, so most commentators agree that Luke thought the women who approached his tomb on Sunday morning were Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Mary the mother of *Jesus*. No doubt carrying the shroud and spices, they arrive to find the stone enclosing the tomb rolled aside. The body had disappeared. Luke tells us they “were perplexed about this.” The Greek word for “perplexed” means “to be at a loss, disturbed”. It is closely related to a cognate that means “drowned”. These women were wallowing in grief and confusion. Had some enemy stolen the body? Moments ago they had dreaded entering the tomb. Now it just made no sense.

According to Luke, at this moment two “men” appeared next to them, and now we embark on a second rabbit trail. Luke clearly intends the reader to infer these “men” are angels sent from God. They wore “dazzling apparel”. They scared the wits out of the women, who “bowed their faces to the ground.” I have learned over the years that while some struggle to believe in angels, others believe they have seen them. Nevertheless, the introduction of angels into this narrative does add to the challenge many face when asked the question, “Is this too good to be true?” We note this now; we shall return to it a bit later.

These messengers from God have a particular message to deliver. They open by asking the women why they seek the living among the dead. We can imagine the women trying to process this even as the angels continue. “Remember how (Jesus) told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise?” The women do indeed remember this. Now. Now they understand what has happened, at least partly. We know this because they go back to the remnants of the disciples, men and women alike, and relate the whole story to them. But with masterful phrasing Luke tells us, “...these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”

Was it too good to be true? One disciple at least was willing to check out the women's “idle tale”. Peter wondered whether it might *not* be too good to be true. Our passage closes with him running to see for himself. He saw only the linen cloths and went home wondering what had happened. Which leads to another question: what did the women and men think had happened? How complete was their understanding? The angels had given them all the information they needed. In fact, Jesus himself had too, all the way back in Galilee, weeks and weeks ago. But did they understand? Peter apparently does not. Yet. As I read this passage, however, I believe the three women might quite possibly have gotten closer to the truth.

Whatever the answers may be, the only pertinent question for us today is, do **we** think Easter is too good to be true? Matthew tells us the guards stationed in the cemetery immediately concocted the story that Jesus' disciples had moved the body in

order to claim that the empty tomb proved he was the Son of God, resurrected from the dead. Is that not a more likely story? What do we believe?

Martin Luther wrestled with this question. He read theologians and philosophers, thought long and hard, and prayed about it. In the end, he decided the answer was simple. Simple to express, that is; but often difficult to accomplish. In a commentary on I Corinthians 15, where the Apostle Paul speaks of the resurrection, Luther writes, "And because Christ animates and renews the heart by faith, He will also surely drag the decomposed rascal after Him and clothe him again, so that we can behold Him and live with Him." The first clause gives us the answer: faith. The second clause tells us Christ will surely drag decomposed rascals (that is we sinners) to himself. The third clause tells us we can see and live with Jesus. But it all hinges on that first clause, that answer: faith.

Is Easter too good to be true? Can you believe it? Do you have faith God's miraculous power to rise from the dead and send angels to talk about it? Actually, even this rather large ask does not encompass the whole story. We read a vision from Isaiah. It speaks of the eventual restoration of God's people in a new heaven and new earth. Pain and death will be no more. Peace will reign over even the animal kingdom. This vision uses apocalyptic imagery we might expect to find in Daniel or Revelation. It speaks of the age to come, when God will finally and perfectly bring the fulfillment of the covenant promises into this reality. It was to this as-yet unfulfilled reign of God that Jesus referred when in the Gospel of John he told his disciples that

he must go away to prepare a place for them. Then he would return to bring them to himself. Thus we are asked to believe not only in his resurrection, but also in his eventual return, his second coming.

Is it all too good to be true? Can we have that faith that Martin Luther called the answer? We started this sermon with an illustration based on one French mathematician. Now we close it with another. Blaise Pascal wrote an important paper on projective geometry at the age of sixteen. At nineteen he invented the first mechanical calculator. He went on to make contributions to the physical sciences. At thirty-one he had a powerful religious experience. For his remaining eight years of life he would write theology. His book, *Pensees* (or thoughts), contains probably his most famous religious writing, *Pascal's Wager*, in which he argues it is entirely logical to believe in God. *Pensee #309* reads, "Jesus said great things so simply that he seems not to have thought about them, and yet so clearly it is obvious what he thought about them. Such clarity together with such simplicity is wonderful. It is also strong evidence for his divinity, for which man, however brilliant, can match it?"

Sometimes we just need to get our heads out of the way. Pascal was a genius. But his appeal for faith relied on concepts like simplicity and humility. If Easter seems too good to be true, take a walk in the woods and really pay attention to all the miracles on display. Smile into a baby's face. Read Jesus' words. Pray. Spend time with others who believe. Faith is the answer. It is also a gift. Receive it with gratitude. Enjoy it today above all days, for Jesus is risen indeed.