

“Too Good” GPPC 4-21-19  
Isaiah 65:17-25, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26, Luke 24:1-12

Retired preaching professor Tom Long says, “Many years ago, a friend told me that his young son was a great fan of both Captain Kangaroo and Mister Rogers. The boy faithfully watched both of their television shows, and one day it was announced that Mister Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. The boy was ecstatic. Both of his heroes, together on the same show! Every morning the boy would ask, ‘Is it today that Mister Rogers will be on Captain Kangaroo?’ Finally the great day arrived, and the whole family gathered around the television. There they were, Mister Rogers and Captain Kangaroo together. The boy watched for a minute, but then, surprisingly, got up and wandered from the room. Puzzled, his father followed him and asked, ‘What is it, son? Is anything wrong?’ ‘It’s too good,’ the boy replied. ‘It’s just too good.’” (Thomas G. Long in *The Christian Century*, April 4, 2001.)

Happy Easter to you! Is it too good, just too good?

Luke says the women come to the tomb early on the first day of the week. They arrive with spices ready for anointing a body, because there is that pesky detail that dead people stay dead, you know. But the stone covering the tomb has been rolled away and the body of Jesus is missing. And to say, as Luke does, that the women are “perplexed about this” seems quite the understatement, doesn’t it?

And suddenly two men in “dazzling clothes” stand beside them. As one Bible scholar explains, “Their clothing is not simply white or bright; it is also glistening, as lightning... These two creatures belong to the divine world, and their intervention will also be as rapid as lightning...” (François Bovon, *Luke 3: Hermeneia-A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, 349.)

So the women do what people usually do when confronted by the divine in such raw, unfiltered form; they are terrified. And they bow their faces to the ground.

And here the angels surprise us. They do not say what angels usually say when they show up. (Anybody remember what angels

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usually say?) “Do not be afraid.” They don’t say that. Instead, they ask a question. “Why do you look for the living among the dead?”

Why do you look for the living among the dead?

It’s a good question for us too. Why do we look for life in deadly attitudes and fatal attractions? Why do we look for life in toxic relationships? In addictions that suck the joy out of life? In frenetic lives without true sabbath and unhealthy lifestyles that are killing us physically and spiritually? In hatreds and revenges that make life squalid instead of rich? Why do we look for the living among the dead?

We don’t need to, you know, because, as the angels tell us, Jesus has been raised. Christ is risen, inviting us to a new way of living, to embrace who we truly are--disciples of the risen Lord of the Universe.

And because each one of us is a disciple of the risen Christ, we gather on Sundays, and especially on Easter Sunday, to remember, celebrate, and comprehend (only partially) what the resurrection means.

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In Isaiah God promises that the days are coming when we won't hear weeping any more. Infants won't live just a few days. Heck, if you don't make it to a hundred years old, people will pity you. The people who build the houses will get to live in them, and the people who plant will get to eat what they've planted. In other words, God's justice and mercy will come in all their fullness. Everybody will be paid fairly and live abundantly. The wolf and the lamb will feed together. And the lamb won't have to sleep with one eye open! God is going to create a world without violence, oppression, and injustice. A new heavens and a new earth, says God. And the resurrection is proof that that day is coming.

And because that day is coming, Jesus spends his life working toward it—speaking the truth in love. Caring for the poor and hungry and homeless and the stranger and the weak. Welcoming the outsiders and the sinners who were told they could not join the religious people.

Some people thought Jesus was a misguided fool. Some even called him evil, just as even now they dismiss the disciples of Jesus who

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follow (imperfectly) in his footsteps. But as we will say in a moment, “God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life...”

The resurrection is the vindication of who Jesus was, what he taught, and how he lived. And for all who dare to follow him, the resurrection is the vindication of our own lives spent trying to teach and live as he did. As the preacher William Sloane Coffin put it, “Easter has less to do with one person’s escape from the grave than with the victory of seemingly powerless love over loveless power.” (William Sloan Coffin, sermon, “Easter: The Authority of Love,” preached at the Riverside Church, April 19, 1987.) So we never give up on God’s justice and mercy. Never, because the resurrection proves it is coming.

And, of course, the resurrection is more. As the Apostle Paul puts it, “If the life we have on the earth now is all there is, then we, of all people, are most to be pitied.” But Christ has been raised from the dead. And he is the first fruits, the model, the prototype of what is coming for the rest of us.

As we know from the post-resurrection accounts in the Bible, after his resurrection Jesus came back to be with his disciples. This wasn't a pleasant memory, a nice dream, a bit of wishful thinking. No. Jesus came back with a new and mysterious form of existence, a body that was in time and space, yet was not bound by time and space. He was recognizable, but different. There was continuity to his previous existence, yet a changed and improved existence. And Paul says the risen Christ is the forerunner for the rest of us. So it's not just that we have warm memories of loved ones, but we hope and trust that we will actually be reunited with God and with them in new bodies, a resurrected existence. All through God's gift in Christ.

And Paul says the resurrection is actually the true power in the universe--every ruler, every authority, every power will bow before the loving reign of Christ. Death itself will be destroyed. Death will be swallowed up by life, like a whale swallowing a minnow.

So we live into the resurrection. We live trusting that God's justice and mercy are coming, and we are not wasting our time when we try to

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be instruments of God's justice and mercy. We live believing that people do not just die and that's it, tough luck, so long, oh well. No. We live believing that God's love is stronger than death and that we will all be resurrected with new bodies, a new existence, and we will all be together in perfect love.

My favorite professor from seminary tells this story. He says, "When I was a freshman in college...I attended over a semester break the annual Christian Association Retreat. We spent those few days discussing of all things, what Jesus signified for the life of believers. Our device was to study one of the Gospels, and on the last day of the retreat we came to the story of the resurrection.

"As we read those familiar words, one ...young woman got up and left the table in disgust: 'It can't be true,' she said.

"'Why not,' asked the leader?"

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“‘Because,’ said the woman, ‘if that is true, then everything is changed.’” (David L. Bartlett, a sermon “Risen Indeed,” preached March 26, 1978 at Hyde Park Union Church.)

“It’s too good. It’s just too good.” But also, “It’s true, and everything is changed.”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen. ©Jeff Paschal