

EASTER ALL WRAPPED UP

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Easter eggs are to be eaten. True, Easter eggs all wrapped up in their glittering foil are pretty to look at, but if that is all they are, then they fail to fulfil their purpose. For Easter eggs are not primarily given as a feast for the eyes, but as a feast for the stomach! Nobody in their right mind leaves an Easter egg on permanent display on their side-board – instead, we tear away at the foil to get at the chocolate inside. The wrappings are secondary – it's what is at the heart of the egg which counts.

What is true of Easter eggs is true of Easter itself. Easter is a great time of the year. It's a time for Easter eggs and Easter bunnies. It's a time for family outings and family reunions. It's a time even for going to church – to enjoy the Easter flowers, to sing the Easter hymns, and to smile at the vicar as yet again he eats a daffodil to amuse the children. But these are all the wrappings. It's the 'heart' of Easter which counts. And the heart of Easter is a story of a bloody cross and of an empty tomb. It's the death of Jesus, and his resurrection which count. But there's the problem. Crosses and tombs are not attractive sights. So we tend to keep them 'under wraps'.

There was nothing attractive about a rough-hewn wooden cross. Death by crucifixion was the cruellest and most barbaric form of execution that has ever been devised. The Assyrians invented it, but their method was too quick. They merely impaled their victims on a sharpened stake, up the anus, through the body, and out through the mouth. So the Romans perfected it, dragged it out longer, refined it, in order to let their victims have more time to meditate upon their crimes. By the second or third day, the victims were half-crazed, as the crows began to peck out their eyes. Compared to crucifixion, Saddam's death by hanging was a doddle.

If we are to get to the heart of Easter, we need to put the 'wrappings' to one side and instead focus upon the cross of Jesus. The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus was crucified at 'The Place of the Skull'. It is this that we celebrate every Good Friday. Or is it Bad Friday? At first sight there appears to be nothing good about that day at all. The physical pain must have been intense. But that was not all. For Jesus experienced the pain of rejection and of desertion.

The crowds which had so joyfully welcomed him as he entered Jerusalem, melted away. Instead there were the jeers of the soldiers, and the taunts of the religious leaders. "He saved others; himself he cannot save". His friends who had been with him for the past three years left him. Everybody – bar his mother – deserted him. And to crown it all, Jesus felt abandoned even by God. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?", he cried. As Jesus hung on that cross the sky went dark - there was an eclipse of the sun that afternoon. However the darkness of that terrible day was but a poor reflection of a dreadful inner darkness Jesus experienced there on the Cross. The torture must have been truly unbearable.

Then came another cry from the lips of Jesus: "I am thirsty". Who wouldn't have been thirsty after having been perched up on a cross for three hours. Jesus was well and truly parched. One of the soldiers kindly offered Jesus a sponge soaked with some cheap wine. Jesus drank the wine.

John in his Gospel goes on to tell us that Jesus cried out once more: “It is finished”. Then he bowed his head and died. Poor, sad, deluded man some of the bystanders no doubt thought. This Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, but it all ended with his untimely death on a cross. What a sad finish to a sad life.

“It is finished”. Were the dying words of Jesus an admission that in fact he was done for – that he was finished? Was Jesus here conceding defeat? Was he admitting that the opposing forces ranged against him had been too strong for him, and that in the end they and not he had won? Was he to all intents and purposes saying to the soldiers: “This is the end; in a few moments you can take my body down and bury it”?

No – Jesus was saying the very opposite. For Matthew, Mark and Luke in their Gospels tell us that when Jesus died, he died with a great shout upon his lips. “It is finished” was no last gasp of defeat. It was a great shout of victory. “I’ve done it!”, “I’ve got there!”, “I’ve achieved what I set out to do!”. Or, to use a modern expression: “It’s all wrapped up!” The job has been done; the mission had been completed.

The fact is that the death of Jesus on the cross was no unfortunate accident. It was part of God’s plan. It was for this purpose that Jesus came into the world. When Jesus began his ministry in Galilee he already had Jerusalem and the cross in mind. At the time it may have seemed that Jesus had his life taken away from him – but as Jesus himself at an earlier stage had predicted, he laid down his life for us of his own free will. Jesus was no martyr figure. There again is another difference between the death of Jesus and say the death of Saddam Hussain.

What more, when Jesus died, he actually died for us. To use the jargon of the Bible Bible, Jesus died “for our sins”. Something actually happened when Jesus died which affects us all. In the words of an old hymn some of us used to sing at school:

*He died that we might be forgiven
He died to make us good
That we might go at last to heaven
Saved by his precious blood.*

Yet at the time none of this was clear. At the time Jesus seemed to be a failure – he seemed to be finished. But three days later, when God raised Jesus from the dead, the truth became crystal clear. For then it became apparent that what seemed to be defeat was actually victory.

A parallel can be drawn with what happened in Winchester after the battle of Waterloo in June 1815, when the British under the leadership of the Duke of Wellington were lined up together with their Belgian, Dutch and German allies, against the French ‘Grande Armee’ commanded by Napoleon Bonaparte. After the battle had ended, the news was flashed by semaphore to London, and then from London to the provinces. As the news was conveyed by semaphore to the people of Winchester, the semaphore on top of Winchester cathedral began to repeat the message. Letter by letter it was spelled out: W-e-l-l-i-n-g-t-o-n de-f-e-a-t-ed. But before the message could be completed dense fog suddenly obliterated the semaphore. News of a lost battle quickly spread throughout the town. But later in the day the fog cleared and the people’s sense of deep sadness turned to vibrant joy as the semaphore arm moved again to spell out the

completed message: “W-el-l-i-n-g-t-o-n d-e-f-e-a-t-e-d t-h-e e-n-e-m-y”.

Jesus in dying on his cross defeated the enemy too. But it was only on Easter Day that all this became clear. Only then did ‘Bad’ Friday turn out to be ‘Good Friday’. The empty tomb was a sign not just that God was at work on Easter Day, but that he was at work on Good Friday too.

This is why the empty tomb is so important to the Easter message. For Easter Day proves that Jesus did not die in vain. In a very real sense the truth of the Christian faith stands or falls with the truth of the resurrection of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul once wrote:

"If there's no resurrection for Christ everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors... And if Christ wasn't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever... If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot". (1 Corinthians 15.16-18 Peterson, *The Message*).

Yet, we have to admit that from a purely rational perspective belief in the resurrection of Jesus is absurd. Dead people do not rise from the dead. Death is always final. Or is it? Lord Byron claimed that there are times when “truth is... stranger than fiction”. Or in the words of Sherlock Holmes, “When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth”.

Down through the years people have sought to question to the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. The oldest book I possess was published in 1749. Entitled *Observations on the History and Evidences of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* it was written by a man called Gilbert West. When Gilbert West began his book, he was not a Christian - indeed, he set out to disprove the Christian faith. And so he read the New Testament. But in examining the evidence, the task changed him. Instead of writing a book disproving the resurrection of Jesus, he ended up writing a book which set out the evidence for the resurrection. Significantly the title page has a quotation from the Apocrypha: “Blame not before thou hast examined the Truth; understand first, and then rebuke”

Gilbert West was not the only man to set out to write a book disproving the Christian faith and then come to a different conclusion. Frank Morrison, a young London journalist, admired the character of Jesus, but felt that his story rested on insecure historical foundations. But when he came to look at the evidence, he had a change of heart and instead wrote a defense of the resurrection - *Who Moved The Stone?* The opening chapter is entitled ‘The book which refused to be written’.

More recently Tom Wright, the present Bishop of Durham, wrote an exceedingly long (817 pages) and heavy (over 6 lbs!) book examining the resurrection of Jesus. After weighing up all the evidence he concluded:

“The historian, of whatever persuasion, has no option but to affirm both the empty tomb and the ‘meetings’ with Jesus as ‘historical events’....: they took place as real events; they were significant events; they are, in the normal sense required by historians, provable events; historians can and should write about

them. We cannot account for early Christianity without them”.

Not surprisingly Lord Darling, a former Lord Chief Justice of England, declared.

“We, as Christians, are asked to take a very great deal on trust: the teachings, for example, and the miracles of Jesus. If we had to take all on trust, I, for one, should be skeptical. The crux of the problem of whether Jesus was or was not what he proclaimed himself to be, must surely depend on the truth or otherwise of the resurrection. On that greatest point we are not merely asked to have faith. In its favour as a living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence, positive and negative, factual and circumstantial, that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in the verdict that the resurrection story is true”.

In other words faith in the resurrection, as indeed faith in the cross of Christ, has nothing to do with blind belief. Christian faith does not involve shutting one’s eyes and with the White Queen in Alice believing six impossible things before breakfast. Christian faith involves ‘reasonable’ believing – even although faith always goes beyond reason.

This leads me back to Easter eggs again. Easter eggs are not just to be admired – they are to be eaten. In turn, the Easter message is not just to be examined – it is to be believed.

In the first place, we are called to believe not just that Jesus died on a cross – that is a historical fact – but to believe that there on that cross Jesus died for us – he died “for our sins”. Yes, if we would get to the heart of the Easter message, then we need to personalise the message. We need to be able to say with the Apostle Paul, that there on his cross Jesus, “the Son of God, loved me and gave himself for me”. Only then can we begin to experience the benefits of the death of Jesus. Only then can we begin to experience the forgiveness of sins that Jesus has to offer.

In the second place, we are called to believe not just that God raised Jesus from the dead – the evidence for that is overwhelming – but that there in the resurrection of Jesus is a promise of life for us that not even death can overcome. In the words of Jesus with which I begin every funeral service: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will not die”. Jesus has carved out a path through the valley of the shadow of death, but only those who by faith follow him will receive the life he has to offer.

Easter ‘all wrapped up’ is of no use to anybody. For Easter eggs and bunnies, Easter lilies and daffodils, Easter hymns and music, are but the wrappings. We need to put the wrappings to one side and get to the heart of the Easter. And to get to the heart we need to focus on the cross and the empty tomb, and see Jesus, who died for us and who was raised to life for us too. Easter is not about the wrappings, Easter is about believing in the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

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Paul Beasley-Murray