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Easter

The Season of the Resurrection of Jesus

Fullness of Time series

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The Fullness of Time

Series Preface

Esau McCaulley, Series Editor

Christians of all traditions are finding a renewed appreciation for the church year. This is evident in the increased number of churches that mark the seasons in their preaching and teaching. It's evident in the families and small groups looking for ways to recover ancient practices of the Christian faith. This is all very good. To assist in this renewal, we thought Christians might find it beneficial to have an accessible guide to the church year, one that's more than a devotional but less than an academic tome.

The Fullness of Time project aims to do just that. We have put together a series of short books on the seasons and key events of the church year, including Advent,

Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, and Pentecost. These books are reflections on the moods, themes, rituals, prayers, and Scriptures that mark each season.

These are not, strictly speaking, devotionals. They are theological and spiritual reflections that seek to provide spiritual formation by helping the reader live fully into the practices of each season. We want readers to understand how the church is forming them in the likeness of Christ through the church calendar.

These books are written from the perspective of those who have lived through the seasons many times, and we'll use personal stories and experiences to explain different aspects of the season that are meaningful to us. In what follows, do not look for comments from historians pointing out minutiae. Instead, look for fellow believers and evangelists using the tool of the church year to preach the gospel and point Christians toward discipleship and spiritual formation. We pray that these books will be useful to individuals, families, and churches seeking a deeper walk with Jesus.

1

The First Easter

Before anything else, Easter is a piece of news. It is an announcement about an occurrence, a short and shocking story. The earliest version of it we have, written fifteen to twenty or so years after the event it recounts, goes like this: "We believe that Jesus died and rose again" (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

The author of those words, a Jew named Paul, wrote a slightly longer version two or three years later, claiming that while it didn't originate with him, he could trace it back to eyewitnesses who would vouch for its veracity:

> I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas,

> then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive. (1 Corinthians 15:3-6)

A wandering Jewish prophet called Jesus—or "Yeshua," in his native language—had died and afterward showed himself newly alive to his friends and followers. That is the Easter story in its most original, most succinct form.

Several years after Paul wrote these versions of the story, a Christian preacher we know as Mark composed a slightly longer version at the end of a yet longer account of the life of Jesus. Starting with his baptism in a river, Mark told the story of Jesus' ministry and abrupt, clandestine arrest, his hasty, don't-look-too-closely-or-you'll-spot-the-gaps-in-the-evidence trial before the Roman authorities who ruled the territory of Israel with a firm but largely apathetic hand, and summary execution.

According to Mark, some women who had accompanied Jesus in his travels and seen him crucified went with some other friends to the place where he was buried. These women, Mary Magdalene and another Mary

identified as the mother of James and Salome, "saw where the body was laid" (Mark 15:47). Within hours or perhaps minutes, the sun was setting and the Jewish Sabbath had begun, which meant the women were obligated to rest in their homes until the following nightfall.

Wasting little time once it was dark again, they took spices they hoped to use to mask the odor of Jesus' decaying corpse and arrived at his tomb as the sun was coming up on the first day of the new week. On their way, they had been troubleshooting an obstacle to their plan: How would they manage to roll the heavy stone away from the tomb's entrance so they could proceed with the spices? But when they looked up, "they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back" (Mark 16:4). They went into the tomb. A young man dressed in white was sitting on the right side, and they became afraid. "Do not be alarmed," the young man said to the women. "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" (Mark 16:6). The women could see that he was right. There was no body and no more need for the spices they'd brought.

The young man spoke again: "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" (Mark 16:7). The young man's words recalled Jesus' foretelling of this event earlier in Mark's narrative, but its meaning hadn't registered with the women or with any of Jesus' other followers, for that matter. No one had been prepared for this turn of events—if that's even what it should be called, there having been no earlier event remotely like the terrifying moment they found themselves enduring now.

It is interesting that the young man mentions Peter. Of all Jesus' disciples he could have singled out for special attention, Peter was the one who had, in the heat of interrogation at Jesus' trial, denied he had ever known him. At this point a question looms. Theologian Robert Jenson says an announcement like the young man's—a dead man is no longer in his tomb but has been raised and is now roaming his old haunts—is not obviously or necessarily good news. What if a stranger dressed in white announced, "Adam Lanza, the Sandy Hook killer, is risen"? That might be good news for a handful of violent would-be copycats, but it would not be good news to any parent concerned for the safety of their children. How could Peter—or the other disciples who had fled the scene at Jesus' arrest to save their own skins—be

confident that Jesus hadn't returned to enact a bloody vengeance?[1]

Perhaps the women thought immediately of how Jesus was known, throughout the whole course of his ministry, for showing mercy to those most in need of it. Maybe that was all the assurance they needed that this was, in fact, a happy announcement the young man had given them. Perhaps they realized that the news—the unconditional friend of tax collectors and sinners is risen—was the most breathtakingly hopeful news that could be imagined.

If so, Mark doesn't tell us. His story concludes with a simple, awkward break: "[The women] 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 16:8).[2]

The Gospel according to Matthew was probably written not too long after Mark's. For the most part, it sticks closely to Mark's version of the story, but it adds numerous details and makes a handful of significant alterations. In a scene that belongs in a horror movie, Matthew

gives a sort of preview of Jesus' resurrection already on Good Friday, right after Jesus cries out with a loud voice and then dies. "At that moment," says Matthew, "the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. The earth shook, and the rocks were split. The tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (Matthew 27:51-52). Jesus' resurrection isn't just an isolated experience, something we admire in his case but don't share in ourselves. Here is a hint that Jesus' resurrection is about others' too—a vital point we'll return to in the next chapter.

Matthew also notes that some of Jesus' friends—all women, as in Mark's account—were there at his crucifixion and again at his burial, looking on: "Among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joseph" (Matthew 27:56); "Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were there" (Matthew 27:61). Along with Mark, Matthew names the member of the Jewish council who supplied an unused tomb—a small cave of sorts, it seems—for Jesus and made sure he was given a proper burial: Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:42-46; Matthew 27:57-60).

But Matthew adds a detail not found in Mark. Some of Jesus' opponents reason that his followers might come

and steal his body from the grave and then falsely claim that he was alive again. "[This] deception would be worse than the first" (Matthew 27:64), they tell Pontius Pilate, the Roman official who had given the order for Jesus to be crucified. Fearing the spread of this pernicious rumor, they ask Pilate to allow them to dispatch some soldiers to keep watch at the tomb to prevent the possibility. Pilate concedes and then says to them, in what Christian leader and author Russell Moore has called the most hilarious line in the whole Bible, "Go, make [the tomb] as secure as you can" (Matthew 27:65).[3]

From there, Matthew dramatically diverges from Mark. He describes the women, Mary Magdalene and "the other [the same as Mark's?] Mary" coming early to the tomb on the morning after the Sabbath. But instead of seeing the dark, gaping mouth of an opened grave, they experience a sudden, "great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men" (Matthew 28:2-4). Turning from the comatose soldiers, Matthew records the angel's words to the women: "Do not be afraid; I know that you

are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you" (Matthew 28:5-7). In response, the women leave the tomb in fear, as in Mark's account, but also now, according to Matthew, with a spark of joy, ready to tell Jesus' other disciples what they've just seen and heard.

And then they see Jesus himself. The encounter is sudden, unlooked-for. Matthew doesn't make the women the subjects of the action, as if by their diligence in searching they were able to force a meeting. Jesus is the one who steps into their path and says as they catch their breath, "Greetings!" (Matthew 28:9). One of the greatest contemporary scholars of the Gospel of Matthew has confessed his confidence in Matthew's report by saying, "I believe that the disciples saw Jesus *and that he saw them*."[4] That is the note Matthew strikes: Jesus, the one who is on the loose and goes ahead of his followers, makes himself visible to them.

Overcome with awe, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary "came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped

him" (Matthew 28:9). Jesus says in response, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me" (Matthew 28:10). In the next turn of the story, the followers of Jesus have made it to Galilee. They go to a mountain Jesus had specified, and there they see him, just as the women had. He's not just a resuscitated corpse, he tells them. He has been brought to life to now be the master and judge of the whole world and the entirety of history. What that means, he says, is that they have a job to do: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

The Gospel according to Luke differs yet again. Almost certainly familiar with at least Mark's account and possibly also Matthew's, Luke tells the same story with a new and different twist. As in Mark's and Matthew's accounts, some women—which ones, exactly, Luke doesn't

say—came to Jesus' tomb at the crack of dawn on the Sunday after his execution. They come bearing spices, as in Mark's Gospel. But they don't sense the tremors of an earthquake. They don't witness any dramatic, supernatural rolling away of the stone from the entrance of the tomb. They see that the stone has already been rolled away, and, going into the empty space, they also see that the corpse isn't there. But then they jump and scream (as I imagine) to find two shining beings at their elbows. They "were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground," says Luke. The dazzling messengers reassure them with a wry question: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5).[5]

At this, the women go back—racing, we must imagine—to the city to tell the other disciples the news. For Luke, the entourage was large: not just Mary Magdalene and the other Mary but another woman named Joanna and "the other women with them" (Luke 24:10). But they are met with disbelief. Despite earlier indications in the Gospel that this eventuality was the divinely promised outcome of Jesus' life and death, faith in the resurrection isn't obviously the right response for the rest of Jesus' followers.

Except for one. After hearing the women's report, Peter leaps up and charges to the tomb. He stoops and looks in and sees "the linen cloths by themselves." Apparently this is enough to prompt at least some kind of incipient faith: he goes home "amazed at what had happened" (Luke 24:12).

Among faithful Christians of later generations up to our day, Luke's Easter account is especially beloved because it doesn't end there but goes on to describe an intimate encounter two disciples have with Jesus later that afternoon.[6] The two disciples are walking toward a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and Jesus falls in with them, although they don't recognize him. Their faces are downcast with sadness when Jesus asks them what they've been discussing with each other. Sadness becomes bewilderment when they realize this man doesn't know what's on everyone's mind. Incredulously, Cleopas asks him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" (Luke 24:18). He goes on to summarize: there was a prophet, Jesus, who aroused the ire of the Jewish authorities and was condemned to death by the Romans; then, a few hours ago, there was a

report—confirmed as accurate by many of Jesus' company—that his tomb was empty.

Jesus, still unrecognized, chides Cleopas: "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:25-26). Jesus proceeds to interpret the prophetic declarations—the Scriptures of Israel, from Moses onward—as foreshadowing what had happened to him.

At this point they are near their destination, and Cleopas and his companion urge Jesus to stay with them rather than continue the journey. "It is almost evening," they reason (Luke 24:29), and Jesus accedes. They sit down to eat, and Jesus—as he had done earlier in Luke's Gospel with loaves and fishes (9:10-17)—takes bread, gives thanks to God for it, breaks it into pieces, and gives it to them. In that instant, the light of recognition dawns—*we've seen this Stranger before!*—and Jesus vanishes.

With burning hearts, they return immediately to Jerusalem to add their story to the other testimonies. "The Lord is risen indeed!" (Luke 24:34). Right then and

there, Jesus appears again. "Peace be with you," he says (Luke 24:36). Their earlier encounter apparently does nothing to diminish their confusion and fear, and they wonder if they are meeting Jesus' ghost. But he quickly dispels that notion by taking a piece of fish—and maybe also, as some early manuscripts of the Gospel say, some honeycomb—and eats it, demonstrating that his flesh is material and solid, not wispy and ethereal.

After delivering a commission to his followers similar to the one Matthew records, Luke—alone among the canonical evangelists—describes Jesus withdrawing and ascending into the sky where, as Luke's sequel describes, a cloud eventually hides him from the disciples' view (Acts 1:9).

The last of the canonical accounts, the one found in the Gospel of John, is in many ways the most intimate and beloved of all four. I say "one" because it is all contained in the Fourth Gospel. But it is not only one encounter—it consists of several accounts (like Luke, in this way) involving several of Jesus' followers.

John's story of Easter morning begins this way: "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb" (John 20:1). John doesn't describe the mingled fear and bewilderment that no doubt flooded Mary's mind and body. He says simply that when she saw the opened tomb, she ran and told Simon Peter and the unnamed disciple "whom Jesus loved" (John 20:2)—almost certainly the eyewitness who ended up penning the Gospel—about what she had seen. Both men immediately ran to the tomb, but the beloved disciple outpaced Peter and reached the destination first.

Peering in, he sees the linen that had shrouded Jesus' corpse, but that's as far as he gets. He doesn't cross the threshold. That job is for Peter, who not only sees the same heap of linen but also a separate piece of cloth that had been on Jesus' head rolled up in a separate place by itself. (Unlike Lazarus, who upon being brought to life again by Jesus emerged from his grave still wrapped in his grave clothes, Jesus apparently left his tomb and his death shroud behind.) With some mysterious mingling of faith and lack of comprehension, Peter and the other disciple leave and return home.

But Mary does not. She stays at the tomb, in tears. Bending over, she looks in and sees two angels dressed in white flanking the place where Jesus' body had been.[7] "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask her. She responds: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). (There is a special poignancy in that *my*.) Immediately thereafter, she turns around and sees Jesus standing near her, but she does not recognize him. At that point, he speaks: "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Imagining she is speaking to the gardener charged with the upkeep of the gravesite, she says through her tears: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away" (John 20:15).

Then, in what may be the most affecting moment in the entire story, Jesus calls her by name: "Mary!" She turns again (does recognition require *metanoia*, a change of posture and perspective, not only for Mary but also for us?) and cries out, "'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)" (John 20:16). Perhaps at this point she lunges toward Jesus in relief and ecstasy, but Jesus rebuffs her: "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father" (John 20:17). The risen Jesus is on his way to the

one he knows as "Father," and until he has been exalted and poured out his Spirit on his followers, it's impossible to hold or pin him down.

No matter. Mary's joy can't be hindered by Jesus' stricture. She runs and tells his disciples, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18). A few hours later, when the disciples are still huddled behind bolted doors for fear of what the authorities might do to them in light of Mary's news, Jesus miraculously appears. And what he says next is the key to understanding the meaning of Easter: "Peace be with you" (John 20:26). To the ones who abandoned him at his moment of direst need, to the ones who fled to save their own skin while his was being flayed, to his betrayers, he says, "Peace." Not "Now you've got it coming," not "Prepare to pay for what you've done," but "Peace."[8] Mercy for the undeserving is the overriding, hope-awakening theme of Easter.

As if to underscore the point, the Gospel of John records two further appearances of the risen Jesus not found in the other Gospels. A week after his encounter with his fearful followers, Jesus appears to another one of them who wasn't present for that initial meeting. Thomas is his name, and he has already told the other disciples, in

response to their report of seeing the risen Jesus, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe" (John 20:25). Undeterred by this avowal, Jesus again announces, "Peace." And he says to Thomas directly, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe" (John 20:27). This scene has been unforgettably rendered by Caravaggio in his seventeenth-century painting in which Jesus has pulled aside his robe and Thomas is inserting his finger into the wound—healed but not closed—that was opened by a spear in Jesus' side while he was hanging on the cross. Rather than chiding, Jesus once again offers mercy, and Thomas responds by calling Jesus "my God!" (John 20:28)—the title the Gospel of John foregrounds in its very first verse.

Finally, the Fourth Gospel describes one final appearance of the risen Jesus to his disciples. One night, back in his native Galilee, Peter says to a small group of Jesus' friends, "I am going fishing" (John 21:3). They tell him they're going too, and together they steer a boat into the middle of the lake that had been their livelihood before they met Jesus. But all night long, they catch no

fish. As the first pink hues of dawn begin to show on the horizon, Jesus yells to them from the shore, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" (John 21:5). Like Mary at the tomb, the disciples in the boat don't recognize the one calling them. They answer simply, "No." Jesus then issues a command (or is it a promise?): "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some" (John 21:6). No sooner have they done so than the net is teeming with fish, and the beloved disciple—the one who had reached the tomb first—says to Peter, "It is the Lord!" (John 21:7). At this point Peter throws on his cloak and leaps into the water, desperate this time to be the first one to see and speak to the risen Jesus. Splashing his way onto the beach, with the other disciples right behind, Peter sees Jesus next to a charcoal fire, cooking fish and toasting bread. "Come and have breakfast," he says (John 21:12).

In the Greek of the Gospel of John, "charcoal fire" is one word, *anthrakia*. And this isn't the first time in the Gospel the word has appeared. In the early, cold morning after Jesus' arrest, just a few hours before Pontius Pilate will condemn him to be executed, Peter stands next to an *anthrakia*, a charcoal fire, to try to keep warm (John 18:18). Bystanders think they recognize him: "You are not also

one of this man's disciples, are you?" One of them adds, menacingly, "Did I not see you in the garden with him?" (John 18:25-26). Peter feels his scalp warming, sweating. His neck prickles with fear. "I am not," he says—not once, not twice, but three times—saving himself at the expense of his Lord. Now, Jesus has come back to Peter at another charcoal fire, and—matching Peter's three disavowals—he asks him not once, not twice, but three times, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" (John 21:15-17).

Jesus rewrites Peter's story of cowardice and faithlessness in that moment on the shore of the lake. With a few gestures and a handful of words, he says, "Far more can be mended than you know."[9] That is the meaning and message of Easter.

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