

“Good News”

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4-16-17 Easter Sunday

Based upon Matthew 27:62-28:1-15; Acts 26:1, 4-15, 19, 22-29

How do you explain something which you know to be true, but which is so outside of everyone’s experience that it seems to be impossible? This is the central premise of a 19th-century satire by Edwin Abbot called Flatland,¹ made popular again more recently by the likes of Carl Sagan and Rob Bell. In the satire, a sphere from a three-dimensional world called Spaceland comes as an evangelist to a square, living in a two-dimensional world called Flatland, to share the good news of the reality of up and down. There are no words for up and down in Flatland, however, only north, south, east, and west, and the idea of three-dimensional space is so inconceivable in that realm, that the square does not believe in the sphere or his message. He assumes the sphere is just a crazy circle telling stories about nonsense. It is only when the sphere, in frustration, kicks the square up into the third dimension so that he can look down on his own flat world that he believes. After that, the square’s understanding is so transformed that he too becomes an evangelist sharing the good news of the reality of multi-dimensional living. Even after the authorities throw him in prison, he refuses to recant or change his message.

I’ve been thinking about Abbot’s story this week because the dilemma that the sphere faced is the dilemma that preachers face every Easter when we are trying to fulfill our calling to preach the good news of the Resurrection. We are all here to hear some good news—God knows this year especially, we need to hear something other than the ubiquitous bad news or fake news which fills our papers and screens each day. But even self-professing, faithful Christians can have a hard time wrapping their minds around the Resurrection. The idea that someone truly dead—not in a coma or faking it—could live again is all but beyond our ability to comprehend. Even though we supposedly live in a post-fact world now, we were raised on science and facts, and most of us have watched enough of T.V. shows like *CSI* or *House* to know about cellular decomposition and have experienced enough of life in this world to know and trust in the reality of death. As a result, preachers like me find ourselves cast in the part of the sphere in Abbot’s story. So maybe this morning instead of saying, “Hear and believe the good news of the Gospel, Christ our Lord is risen indeed!” I should just start us off easy by saying, “Brothers and sisters, believe the good news of up and down!” Since we already accept the reality of three dimensions, the announcement wouldn’t be quite as dramatic, but then at least we could leave feeling confident that the good news is neither simply a metaphor, nor only a dream.

But I am not called to tell you that the world is limited to the sum total of our experience. I am here to tell you the Easter good news that the world as we know it is not all there is or can be. I am here to tell you that through the grace of God in Jesus Christ even now there is a new creation unfolding, one which began with God’s breaking of all the rules of the old one; therefore, we know that all things are possible through God’s grace. I am here to tell you that Jesus of Nazareth was and is raised, which means that he was and is Lord, that God is love, that we are forgiven, and that the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed is real and accessible here and

¹ Abbot, Edwin, Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions (Dover Thrift Ed.) (Mineola: Dover Pub., 1992).

now. This is not just the good news we want to hear. It is real news, whether we believe it or not.

How can we know this? I wish that I could walk you through every fact, both biblical and historical, and every theory that challenges the Resurrection this morning to address your doubts. But this morning we do not have time, and biblical scholar/theologian N.T. Wright has already done this beautifully in his book Surprised by Hope, which I commend to your reading.² For now, I will say that I believe we can trust in the truth of the good news, in part, because I, like the sphere, have experienced its reality myself, and in part because so many others have before me as well. That's really astonishing when you think about it. Despite the fact that Easter good news has always been extraordinary and almost incomprehensible, and despite the fact that there have been countless attempts throughout the ages to discredit the good news and stop its spread, the good news of God's love is still transforming hearts and minds and lives thousands of years after the Resurrection happened.

According to *Matthew*, the first attempt to kill the good news started even before the Resurrection. Some of the Jewish authorities remembered that when Jesus taught in the Temple, he said that "after three days he would rise again." So in order to prevent the disciples from stealing the body and spreading the idea that Jesus' prophecy came true, they had Pilate send guards to seal the tomb and stand guard over it. But the guards could not stop the Resurrection, and when the stone was rolled away despite their best efforts, they were almost scared to death by the heavenly messenger who told them that their plot had failed. When they recovered enough to go report the miracle to the chief priests, an amazing thing happened, according to *Matthew*. The priests believed the guards enough to be terrified themselves that their power was about to be usurped. So they paid off the guards to share a different story, one that they made up, which was that the body was stolen. And we thought fake news was a 21st-century problem!

Their plan probably would have worked if the only evidence of the Resurrection has been the empty tomb. Even in those pre-Enlightenment days, people believed that dead meant dead, so they would not have needed convincing that some kind of theft or bait and switch had happened with the body. But the empty tomb was not the only evidence of the Resurrection. The best evidence was the risen Christ himself, who visited hundreds of people, not just the women and the 11 disciples, in the weeks after the crucifixion. Again, as N.T. Wright has noted, if only the latter had happened, then people would have said the followers of Christ were having grief-inspired hallucinations.³ They had words for that kind of psychological phenomenon even back then. But that is not what they said they saw. Instead they consistently used the much less familiar word "Resurrection." Thus, the combination of the accounts of something supernatural happening at the tomb, and the sightings of the resurrected Christ, made the news hard to reject out of hand, especially considering that the sighting radically changed people's lives. Then when non-believers started seeing the risen Christ, the story became hard to contain.

² Wright, N.T., Surprised By Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

³ *Ibid*, 58-59.

The Apostle Paul was one of those non-believers. We don't know whether he saw Christ or just heard him on the Damascus Road. In his letters, he seems to suggest that he had more than an auditory experience. But in today's lesson from *Acts*, when Paul is defending himself to King Agrippa and Roman governor Festus, Paul speaks of how radically the experience changed him. "Listen," he says to Agrippa, who was Herod the Great's grandson and someone described as zealous for Judaism, "You value Judaism and so do I. I was known among the Jews as a faithful, well-educated, a strict supporter of the law. I am not crazy, and did not follow Jesus before the crucifixion. In fact, I persecuted the Christians zealously. But then he came to me and that changed everything I know to be true. Do you think I would turn my life upside down on a rumor or flight of fancy? Do you think I would continue to risk ridicule, imprisonment, even death for a story? If you want proof that this really happened, I am your proof because I would not be here if it were not true."

Paul's transformation, and the transformation of all of the disciples from fearful fishermen to fearless evangelists speaks volumes, not just because something changed them, but also because even when the world was against them, they would not recant what they knew to be true. This is documented in non-biblical sources, and this fact is what persuaded the late Chuck Colson of the truth of the Gospel. Colson was convicted for his involvement in the Watergate scandal, which might make you doubt his credibility immediately. But it was this experience of conspiracies and fake news, ironically, which helped him to believe. He wrote, "Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetuated by the closest aides to the president... the most powerful men in American, who were intensely loyal to their president. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence... 'to save his own skin'—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on—two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that those around the president were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake. But what about the disciples? Twelve powerless men, peasants, really, were facing not just embarrassment or political disgrace, but beatings, stonings, execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they had physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those apostles would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? The Watergate cover-up reveals the true nature of humanity. Even political zealots at the pinnacle of power will, in the crunch, save their own necks, even at the expense of the ones they profess to serve so loyally. But the apostles could not deny Jesus, because they had seen him face to face, and they knew he had risen from the dead."⁴

Like the square in Abbot's story, the people who encountered the risen Christ, who experienced the transforming power of God's grace through him, were kicked into a new reality which the Bible calls the kingdom of God. They could not deny that reality, even when they no longer felt that they were living in it. But what about us? Do we live as those who know the good news is real even if it is hard to comprehend, or do we enjoy the story on Easter, but live the rest of our lives in Flatland? It is important to ask ourselves this because the point where the

⁴ Colson, Charles, *BreakPoint Online Commentaries* (4:29:02); submitted by Cynthia Davenport-Herbst, Paris, Texas, retrieved 4-1-04 from <http://www.preachingtoday.com/index.taf?-UserReference=DB108c93>

ancient story and our lives intersects is the point where, as Wright puts it, “*believing in the resurrection of Jesus suddenly ceases to be a matter of inquiring about an odd event in the first century and becomes a matter of rediscovering hope in the twenty-first century*. Hope is what you get when you suddenly realize that a different worldview is possible, a worldview in which the rich, the powerful, and the unscrupulous do not after all have the last word. The same worldview shift that is demanded by the resurrection of Jesus is the shift that will enable us to transform the world.”⁵

We live in a time when many people are feeling starved for reasons to hope. The good news of Easter provides reasons to hope in spades. The Resurrection teaches us that God is more powerful than death, that love is more powerful than hate, and that the bad guys will not have the last word. The Resurrection teaches us that new life is possible for us even when we are old and tired, or have failed more times than we can count, or feel more like a bunch of inadequacies wrapped in flesh than exemplary examples of humanity. The Resurrection teaches us that radical resets are always possible for our own lives and our world, even when it feels like the way things have been is the way they always will be. The Resurrection teaches that we can live with God now, not just when we die. A new creation has begun. We may not be able to see it all the time, and we may not have adequate words to describe it, but it is here. So if you came here searching for hope, then hear and believe the good news!

But if you came here already solidly believing the good news, then today is about remembering not just what the empty tomb proclaims but also how important what we proclaim is. We are called to be the evidence of Easter’s truth. This is how it has always worked. The guards persuaded the authorities of the truth enough that they felt threatened by it. The women at the tomb shared the news with the disciples, who in turn spread the news when they encountered the risen Christ, as did Paul after his encounter. Most people who believe, do so because they know, love, and respect someone who conveyed to them in a way they could not dismiss, that the Gospel is real, true, and transforming good news. We are the evidence that the Resurrection happened when we allow it to happen in us.

How can we prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Resurrection happened? We can’t, at least not in a way that will persuade everyone we meet. But it did happen. So accept the gift of God’s love that you have been given, and live in such a way that you make the truth and the hope of the good news evident. You don’t have to do this by becoming the kind of evangelist who offers personal testimony wherever he or she goes. There are any number of ways to convey the joy and blessing of God’s love and the reality of the new creation Christ’s Resurrection began. Wendell Berry offers these suggestions in these excerpts from his poem, *Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front*:

⁵ *Ibid*, Surprised by Hope, 75.

So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it....

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias....

Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts....

As soon as the generals and the politicians
can predict the motions of your mind,
lose it. Leave it as a sign
to mark the false trail, the way
you didn't go. Be like the fox
who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.⁶

Amen.

⁶ Excerpts from "*Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front*," [The Country of Marriage](#) (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 1973, 2013 edition).