

John 20:19-31
Revelation 1:4-8
"He is Risen. He is Risen!?!&\$#@"

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For everyone, Easter begins with a 3-word proclamation: "He is risen." Sure, we could talk about Easter baskets and chocolate bunnies and egg hunts and how, for many of our children, Easter begins with waking up to find them in the living room and yard. And we could talk about the new ties and dresses we put on that would make a stranger stop and say, "Ooh, it must be Easter." And we could talk about the many people who call up the cousins and neighbors to say, "Want to come over for Easter dinner?" And that's all lovely. Don't get me wrong, I believe there is a bit of Easter to be found in everything. One doesn't always have to go to church to be able to say they've done Easter. But that's not the kind of Easter I'm talking about today—the church-type or not. I'm talking about the kind of Easter that begins with the words, "He is risen."

Few things could make us wake up and change all our plans for the day than to hear someone say, "He is risen."

"What? The dead body we put into the grave isn't there anymore? That's great!" Except, we have become so accustomed to hearing this news as part of the Easter story that we can almost forget it wasn't Easter when this news first hit the wires, and it wasn't great news. Case in point, the disciples of John's gospel. Upon hearing the news from Mary Magdalene that their friend and teacher has been raised from the dead, the disciples do not run over hill and dale to spread the news. Just the opposite, John records that they lock themselves away in fear. Fear. What is about "He is risen" that could make a person hide in fear?

In her essay, *"Truth to Tell,"* Episcopal Priest Barbara Brown Taylor reminds us that "Jesus was not brought down by atheism and anarchy."

He was brought down by law and order allied with religion, which is always a deadly mix. Beware those who claim to know the mind of God and are prepared to use force, if necessary, to make others conform. Beware those who cannot tell God's will from their own. Temple police are always a bad sign. When chaplains start wearing guns and hanging out at the sheriff's office, watch out. Someone is about to have no king but Caesar.

[The story of Good Friday is one] that can happen anywhere at anytime, and we are as likely to be the perpetrators as the victims. We may not end up playing the part of Annas, Caiaphas or Pilate. They may have been the ones who gave Jesus the death sentence, but a large part of him had already died before they ever got to him—the part Judas killed off, then Peter, then all those who fled. Those are the roles with our names on them—not the enemies but the friends.

So we can imagine how Peter and “the friends” felt when they heard Jesus was risen. “I said I didn’t know him. When he was in the courtyard—getting whipped, kicked in the teeth—when he needed a friend, I said I didn’t know him. But I did know him.”

“When we were with him on the mountain that day, and he said blessed are the poor and blessed are you if you believe in me, and I said I believed in him. I said I believed in what he stood for. But then he said, carry your cross, and I carried nothing.”

And now he’s back, and what will he think of us? Will he be ashamed of us? Will *he* now say about *us*, “*I don’t know you.*”

Who among us doesn’t know this kind of honest fear? It can overwhelm and burden us—the fear of having disappointed someone whom we wish we had loved better—it can burden us so heavily that we decide the cost of reengagement is too great and we are better off just...hiding away. So when they call, we try not to pick up the phone. When they come around, we avoid them.

For the disciples, it’s not just their fear of Jesus that has taken hold of them. John says the disciples have locked themselves away for fear of the Jews. But who are the Jews and what’s to fear about them? If we take what Barbara Brown Taylor says to be true, the Jews were those who, in this particular instance, claimed to know the mind of God and who said, the mind of God would never have come up with the likes of Jesus. The Jews are Annas, Caiaphas, the High Priest—the Jewish leadership who represents the Jewish establishment.

They were looking for a Savior, they were looking for God, because only God can save us—that’s just Jewish theology 101—and they told the world, “We’ll point him out when he arrives.” In other words, we’re the establishment, we’re the leadership. We have the answers. We know what to look for.

A political liberator, a military general, a religious crusader. If you were looking for a savior, what would you look for? To say the least, the Jewish leadership was not looking

for the likes of Jesus, and when the world started to gather around Jesus, it upset the Jewish establishment. It opened the door to the possibility that maybe the priests and pastors didn't have all the answers.

Ironically, at no point in his earthly ministry did Jesus ever claim to be a savior, let alone The Savior. He never called himself The Answer. What he did say was, "I have come to seek and save the lost." Of course, to do this—to seek and save the lost—one must go to where the lost are. But where is that? If you were looking for the lost, where would you look? In Jesus' day, there were no food pantries for the hungry lost. No counseling centers for the mentally lost. No churches for the spiritually lost. In fact, places of worship were the last places you'd go looking for the lost, because the lost knew they weren't welcome there. Those were places of establishment, places of order. You didn't show up to worship unless you had your stuff together and the lost can't even find their stuff.

So Jesus goes out into the country sides, out into the back alleys of the city streets. He hangs out in the skid rows and local bars. He picks up quite a following and one day, when they're all sitting around talking about the day, Jesus asks them, "Who do you say I am?" And Peter—a Jew and a disciple—answers, "You are the Savior." And the whole establishment nearly falls off their barstools. "We can't have people thinking that God operates like Jesus. It's not proper. It's out of order. It's grace gone wild. It has no defined edges and boundaries. Love just showing up wherever it is needed."

So they cook up a plan to shut him down. They crucify him, kill him, and put him in the ground. And it works...for about 3 days. For just this morning Mary Magdalene showed up banging on the door and yelling, "He has risen!" For Mary, it's a 3-word proclamation that ends with an exclamation point. It's a whole new world! The boundaries are broken, the walls come tumbling down, the impossible is suddenly possible, this old world is born anew! Let's get going!

For others, it's a 3-word proclamation that ends with a question mark. Are you sure? How do you know? Can I see him and touch him? If I'm going to believe, I need a little more proof.

If you're the establishment, though—if you like things the way they are, if you see it as your job to keep order and provide answers—if you're the establishment—if you're committed to blood, soil, and tribe and to keeping up walls, if other people's pain is your

gain—if you’re the establishment, or you’re just afraid of the establishment, it’s a 3-word proclamation that ends in nothing short of an expletive. “He is risen? Oh no. We’re in trouble. The whole world has changed, and we don’t want to change.” Or, we don’t know how to change. Quick, let’s head underground. Let’s lock the doors and keep out everyone who is not us.

And that’ll work, but not for long. Jesus comes, stands at the door, he sees it’s locked. He knows what’s on the other side. He wants to set it free, and so he goes right on through.

Last week, Steve Casavant told me a story that has stuck with me all week. Getting up on Easter morning, the first thing Steve thought to do was to text his friend with the 3-word proclamation: “He has risen.” Now Steve expected his friend knew to text back: “He is risen indeed.” Instead, this is what Steve got back. “Hey man. I’m so sorry I never got back to you last week when you texted me about getting together.” What? Steve said to himself. That’s old news. He has risen!

Getting in the car to come to church, Steve decided to try again. “He has risen!” And from the backseat came that teenage response we have all heard and come to depend upon: “Yeah.”

Getting to church, Steve sat through the entire service, and after service he said to me, “I can’t believe it. All morning I’ve been going around saying, ‘He has risen,’ and looking for someone to say back, ‘He has risen indeed.’ And still I haven’t heard anyone say it.” Steve was right. Not even I put it out there last week.

Steve, for you and all who share your spirit, I have not just three words for you today, but four. “He has risen. He has risen indeed.”