



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

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HE IS RISEN, JUST AS HE SAID

Matthew 28

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Over the years, my family has enjoyed Susan Wise Bauer's excellent survey of world history, *The Story of the World*. It's one of those rare textbooks that isn't tedious but in fact makes history come to life, which in turn renders it easier to remember. Sometimes we even listen to the audiobook version in the car.

Not everyone believes that there is a coherent "story of the world." There was a generation of philosophers during the 20th Century, most notably existentialists like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, who argued that life is absurd, and there is no coherent story. But as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, there's more than a little irony in the fact that in order to get their point across, they primarily wrote novels. They had to tell absurd stories to try to convince the world that there is no coherent Story.

Existentialism is no longer fashionable, but there are still plenty who argue that life is utterly random. Consider this excerpt from an essay by contemporary philosopher Jennifer Michael Hecht:

If life were a play, I could understand why people feel worried that they will be called to leave early. Their concern would be that they would miss the wrap up, the Act Three that makes sense of Acts One and Two, the payoff that turns the potential energy of all that drama into something kinetic that could change one's perspective and move one's heart. You wouldn't want to miss the punch line of the joke, the turn at the end of the sonnet, or the finish line of the race. It is funny, now that I list them, how many of our entertainments have an extra kick at the end — even doing a crossword puzzle, pleasurable as the process is, has a happy ending in the satisfaction you get when you have answered all its interlocking queries....

Life, however, is not a play. Nor is this life a joke, or if it is, it is the kind without a punchline. Life rambles.¹

The occasion for this essay was the death of fellow atheist Christopher Hitchens. Nevertheless, in attempting to argue against any sort of grand purpose in life, Hecht couldn't help but tell

¹ *Ottawa Citizen*, Dec 17, 2011, B7.

some of Christopher Hitchens' story, including commenting on some of the unwise choices he made that probably led to his untimely death.

I am convinced that for us as human beings, storytelling is like breathing. It's an essential way that we make sense of our lives and of the whole world. Try as we might to suppress the narrative instincts of our hearts and minds, we simply cannot **not** tell stories.

Easter is the most important of all Christian holidays, the day when Christians everywhere celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The reason why this day is so important is because it marks a crucial turning point in the Story of the World.

You may remember that the ancient Greeks sorted their stories into two buckets: tragedies and comedies. And if we stop for a moment and reflect honestly on the overall story of our world, it's pretty clear which bucket to put it in.

Civilizations rise, and then crumble. Governments and rulers at their best are imperfect, but more often corrupt, and sometimes downright sinister. Yes, there are plenty of happy moments, but there are many more sad ones. Some combination of violence, crime, hatred, prejudice, fear, illness, shame, and guilt are part of daily life for everyone, everywhere including you and me. The only reason that we're not raw from all this tragedy is because we've grown so accustomed to it. It's commonplace. It's the way things are, so we try to make the best of things under the circumstances.

Then there's *death*. Death is the one thing that we can never get used to. We all know it will come to us and our loved ones, sooner or later. It is my experience that no matter how prepared someone may be for it, when death comes it still feels terribly wrong. Try as we might to cover over death and make it more palatable, it's still the clearest sign that something is fundamentally wrong with our world, and the story we're living is a tragedy.

The God we meet in the pages of the Bible isn't indifferent to our pain and suffering. He agrees that something is fundamentally wrong with our world. He doesn't sugarcoat death, or dance around it with euphemisms. He says, repeatedly, "I take no pleasure in the death of anyone." The God of the Bible hates death every bit as much as we do.

People unfamiliar with the Bible often think that it's some kind of rule book or instruction manual, but that's not accurate. The Bible is first and foremost a story. It tells the story of God's intervention in our world to rescue us from tragedy. It's the epic tale of how God picks up the broken pieces of our world and sets everything to rights. At one point in the story, God summarizes his intervention in this simple way: He says, "Look! I'm renewing everything." (Rev 21:5).

If you cheat, and flip to the very last pages of the Bible, (which you're not supposed to do with a typical novel but is perfectly okay with the Bible), then you'll get a glimpse of what God means by "the renewal of everything." When he's finished with our world, God will wipe away every tear, and death shall be no more. It's not, by the way, cherubs floating in the clouds. It's life much as we know it, with creativity and work and food and drink and rest and fun—only without all of the evil that continually plagues us. That's one of the reasons why people love the Bible so much: it has the happy ending we all long for.

How does God intend to renew everything and bring about this happy ending? It's complicated, but we can pinpoint in the story of the Bible when everything begins to change. If you were to read the Bible in its entirety, you would discover that Jesus Christ is the fulcrum on which the whole story pivots. Before you meet Jesus in the Bible, if you've only been reading what we traditionally know as the Old Testament, the story is a thoroughgoing tragedy. God's renewal efforts never seem to take, and things go from bad to worse. Most of the heroes in the Old Testament turn out to be not so heroic after all, and the villains just keep ending up on top. So if you're reading straight through and you come to the end of the Old Testament, it's very disappointing. There are loose ends everywhere. It's clearly an unfinished, unresolved story.

Jesus emerges within the biblical story on the first Christmas. That's when everything begins to change. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are the four "reporters" who tell us Jesus' story. In their separate accounts, each of them is eager to show all the many ways that Jesus begins to fulfill and complete the unanswered questions of the Old Testament. Jesus doesn't renew everything, but he is the turning point. After Jesus, one by one, every loose end gets resolved until, in the final pages of the Bible, God wipes away every tear and death is no more.

For this reason, readers familiar with the classics will sometimes describe the Bible as a **tragicomedy**, that peculiar blend of tragedy and comedy, a tale of death that somehow ends with joy. Jesus is the hero who makes the renewal of everything possible. Because of Jesus, the saga of God's intervention in our broken world eventually ends with the renewal of everything.

Make no mistake: the biblical story is still very sad for many reasons, but chief among them is that Jesus, the true hero of the story, must die. He foretells his death again and again (though he also says that he will rise again). The week prior to his crucifixion, Jesus explains what's about to happen to him by way of a poignant analogy. He says, "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Clear as mud, right? Nobody really understands what Jesus is talking about, nobody really knows what to expect.

Then it happens. Though he's done nothing to deserve it, Jesus is betrayed by a friend, arrested by a mob, falsely accused, wrongly convicted, publicly humiliated, brutally tortured and then finally subjected to the worst form of execution that the Roman empire could devise: the slow, agonizing death of being nailed to a cross. If we hadn't already been convinced of the

brokenness of our world, the crucifixion of Jesus is the smoking gun. No one else in all of history deserved it less than Jesus.

Yet even in his death, Jesus is tying up loose ends. If there were more time, we could look back into the Old Testament and see how all of God's prior efforts to renew our world were precursors and pointers to this one. On the cross, Jesus becomes the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. His body, nailed to the cross, becomes the intersection point for all the old stories, as well as all the sin and sorrow of our world. He gathers it all up into his flesh, fully convinced that he will somehow bring an end to our tragedy and jump start the renewal of everything. Then he dies.

The earth shakes, the temple curtain is torn in two, tombs are split open, but it looks as if we're headed towards another very unhappy ending.

Pontius Pilate is still the Roman governor. He allows Jesus' body to be taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen shroud, and sealed in a tomb.

The Temple authorities—the chief priests and the Pharisees—still hate Jesus dead just as much as they did when he was alive. They petition Pilate for the authority to post guards outside the tomb, so that no one can fake Jesus' resurrection.

In the other Gospel accounts, we find Jesus' disciples confused and discouraged, wondering, "What now? We thought—we hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel."

It appears that God's plan has failed. His hero, Jesus, is buried in the ground. No happy ending. Is this just the same old tragedy once again?

Then early on that first Easter, or so the story goes, everything changes. Like a grain of wheat that fell into the ground and died, Jesus emerges from the tomb, alive, and as we'll soon discover, bearing fruit. Jesus is the first harvest of the New Creation. This is the turning point in the story. Death no longer has the last word. The renewal of everything has begun.

Recently at the Church of the Resurrection we studied Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) together. Each week, as we worked our way through Jesus' message, we continually had to decide between two stories of the world. We kept hearing Jesus say things like, "You've heard it said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, 'Love your enemies too.'" "You've heard such and such, but I say so and so"—all the way down to Jesus' final challenge. He said that those who chose not to follow his teaching would be like fools who built houses on the sand, while those who lived according to his teaching would be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. Jesus' entire Sermon on the Mount challenges his hearers to decide whether to believe his story of the world, or somebody else's.

The last chapter of Matthew ends with this same challenge: will we believe Jesus' story of the world, or that of his opponents?

- In Matthew 28:1-10, there's the account of Jesus' resurrection. Early Sunday morning, the women arrive to find Jesus' tomb empty, and the angel says something to them that we all ought to consider. The angel says (28:6), "He is not here, for he has risen, as he said." The angel isn't mocking them. That's not the point. Rather, it's another call to decision. "See? Jesus told you the truth. Now will you believe his story of the world?"
- In Matthew 28:11-15, there's an alternative explanation of events. The guards report to the Temple authorities what happened, and the chief priests decide to pay them handsomely to cover it up. Even though the chief priests had sealed the tomb, and employed soldiers to guard it overnight, the soldiers had all fallen asleep, Jesus' disciples came quietly in the night and without waking up the guards they unsealed the tomb, rolled away the stone, and slipped away with the putrefying corpse. So (27:15) the guards do as they're instructed, and this story continues to circulate for the next 30 odd years, up to the time of Matthew's writing, and has continued to circulate to this day.

Over the centuries, many people have weighed these two stories and have ended up siding with Jesus' version of what happened. A common theme has been the utter absurdity of the disciples' stealing Jesus' body, not only in terms of the actual theft itself, but also the high improbability that such a hoax, perpetuated by a group of people, could have been kept a secret during the intense persecution that took place as Christianity began to grow and spread.

In the end, it's important to recognize that both stories require a leap of faith. We can either choose to believe that the whole thing was the most elaborate hoax in human history, or else we can choose to believe that Jesus really did keep his promise, and rise again from the dead.

As he has done throughout his Gospel, now in his conclusion Matthew leaves us with a decision to make: whether to believe Jesus' story of the world, or whether to believe his opponents. As we consider which version to believe, let's be clear about what's at stake. The Apostle Paul, that great ambassador for Christianity throughout much of southern Europe and Asia minor, said it best when he wrote that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Christianity is futile. That's because Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus wasn't simply a happy ending for him, but it was the turning point in the story of the world.

Jesus' resurrection launched the renewal of everything, and all the bad things in this world coming untrue. It doesn't mean that Christians won't suffer in between the first Easter and the ultimate renewal of everything. There's so much that remains broken, and Christians must go out into that brokenness as salt and light, engaging the brokenness as agents of renewal. That's why Jesus gives his disciples the Great Commission in the very last verses of Matthew 28. Nevertheless, suffering won't have the last word. As one of the more than 500 witnesses to Jesus' resurrection, Paul believed Jesus' story of the world. He suffered as an agent of renewal,

and then he died with the firm conviction that someday he will be resurrected to eternal life with Jesus.

He is risen, just as he said. Therefore, he will wipe away every tear, and death will be no more, just as he said.

That's the good news of Easter, and really every time Christians gather. We believe that Jesus is alive. The renewal of everything that began with his resurrection from the dead is now unfolding before our eyes.

The story of our world will indeed have a very happy ending. He is risen, just as he said.