

The Exception to the Rule

Preached FCCW, April 21 2019 (Easter Sunday)

Luke 24:1-12

I subscribe to a news magazine that, week after week delivers a pretty comprehensive summary of current events from around the globe. In every issue of this magazine, you will find a section named, “It Wasn’t All Bad.” As the name implies, this section is devoted to showcasing positive and upbeat stories about people acting courageously, kindly and selflessly. It is also the smallest section of every issue. Never taking up more than a quarter page or so at most.

While the obvious intent of the “It Wasn’t All Bad” section is to provide some good news to balance out the bad, that very title serves to draw the readers’ attention to the sobering fact that what is found under that heading represents little more than the exception to the rule of the mostly bad news to be found on every other page. So, while “It Wasn’t All Bad” offers a positive exception to the rule, its very reason for being there also reinforces that the news, as a rule, is in fact mainly bad news. The same can be said about any exception to any rule. At the same time that the exception proves that the rule isn’t absolutely unbreakable, it is also establishing the long odds of actually witnessing the rule being broken.

The Easter story reads like an “It Wasn’t All Bad” sidebar coming on the heels, as it does of all the “it was really, really bad” stuff concerning the arrest, trial and crucifixion of Jesus. Nowhere is this more evident than in the way the Luke’s Gospel tells the story.

It has been observed, often with some winking and giggling, how many times “buts” are mentioned in Luke’s version of the Resurrection. Not in the anatomical sense of the word, but in the grammatical sense.

“But” is an *exception to the rule* kind of word. Wherever “but” appears in a sentence it usually means that whatever comes after the “but” is going to be an exception or a contradiction to everything that was stated before the “but.” And Luke uses five “buts” to tell the Easter story.

The passage begins with, “BUT on the first day of the week some of the women who had followed Jesus, came to the tomb where he was laid. They came with the spices needed to prepare the body.” The rule was that the body would be prepared before going into the tomb. BUT Jesus had died on Friday afternoon, just a few hours before the Jewish sabbath began. The exception to the general rules for a proper burial was that preparation of the body was not allowed during the sabbath. So, the women had to wait until the morning after the sabbath was over to do the job. When they get to the tomb the stone that covered the entrance is conveniently rolled aside so that they can enter.

BUT, once inside there is no body to be found. The rules say that when a body is placed in a tomb and sealed with a massive stone, it’s not going anywhere. BUT this was obviously an exception to that rule.

Although Jesus' body is missing, the women realize that they are not alone. Two angels have joined them inside the tomb where Jesus had been. The angels ask them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Maybe the women were thinking to themselves, "Of course you don't look for the living among the dead. BUT, it's not anyone living that were looking for. We're looking for Jesus. We saw him take his last breath and we watched as he was laid here."

If that *was* what they were thinking, it was because their thoughts were running according to the one rule that wasn't known to have any exceptions to it. The rule that marks the dividing line between what is dead and what is alive. BUT the angel said, "He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."

And, suddenly they DID remember! They remembered that more than once he had warned his disciples that he would be crucified but then would rise on the third day. BUT, since that was not the storyline any of his followers expected to play out for him, what he said went in one ear and out the other.

Maybe they should have listened better. After all, so much else that Jesus had said and done while he was alive proved to be exceptions to the rules. Why wouldn't he be the exception to the rule in his death as well? The rule that said when you're dead and buried, YOU ARE dead and buried. No ifs, ands, or buts.

He is risen!

That was the news that the women raced from the tomb to share with the other disciples, who were still grieving and fearing for their own lives. The news that, as bad as the last three days had been—and they had been worse than they could ever have imagined—"it wasn't all bad," after all! BUT, when they got there, the disciples refused to believe the women; and treated them as if they were delusional.

BUT, one of them—Peter—ran to the tomb anyway to see with his own eyes whether what they said was true. He peered into that hole in the rock where Jesus had been laid and where he still should have been—to find nothing—but the cloth his body had been wrapped in. Then he went home, amazed at what had happened. Amazed that Jesus had indeed turned out to be an exception to the rules of life and death.

But like most exceptions to the rules, Jesus' empty tomb didn't do a thing to change the fact that every other tomb in that graveyard was still occupied by whatever inhabitants had been placed in them. It would take awhile for Peter and the others to comprehend that Jesus' resurrection was so much more than an exception to the rule. By raising Jesus from death God had announced that the rules governing life and death had been totally *rewritten for everyone!*

A couple of decades after Jesus' resurrection the Apostle Paul wrote to some Christians in the city of Corinth who at that time were still struggling to believe in the promise of their own bodily resurrection. He told them, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all

people most to be pitied. BUT in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” “First fruits” referred to a small sampling of the harvest that was presented as a sacrifice of thanksgiving to God. And though the first fruits were just a tiny percentage of the entire crop, the giving of them reinforced the awareness that the entire harvest belonged to God. No exceptions.

Paul was telling the Corinthians who doubted Christ’s resurrection—and therefore their own—that without such a hope their faith was just a sad illusion. BUT—in *fact*—Christ *had* been raised. And so, so would they.

I think there is, if not an exception, at least a corollary to Paul’s statement that “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” And, that corollary is, “if only for the *next life* we have hoped in Christ; BUT that hope does not make a difference in the way we are living *this* life, we have missed the point.” True Easter joy is not expressed once a year with lilies, bonnets and colored eggs, but in lives set free to love as Christ loves you. There’s a lyric in a song by U2 called Window in the Skies, about the power within the ultimate exception to the rule that can change your world, and change the world through you.

*The rule has been disproved,
the stone it has been moved,
The shackles are undone
The bullet's quit the gun
Love makes strange enemies
Hate brought to its knees
Oh, can't you see what love has done,
Oh, can't you see what love has done,
Oh, can't you see what love has done,
and what it's doing to me?*

What is God’s love doing to you? Resurrection life does not begin when tombs are opened BUT when hearts are opened. Easter makes it possible for *you* to be an exception to the rule. An exception to any rule that places self-interest before things like compassion, justice, peace, and generosity. Each one of us can be a great big BUT in all the pain and bad news of this world.

The work of Lent is behind us. The work of abstaining and fasting from whatever may diminish God’s rightful place in our hearts. But the challenge of Easter is always before us. The challenge of embracing resurrection living.

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