

“The End that Wasn’t”

Introduction: Sometimes when I’m out for a walk I’ll take a loop through Spring St. Cemetery, and sometimes when I do so I’ll see a person or two who has come to spend some time at a loved one’s grave. Sometimes they’ll bring flowers, or water flowers that they’ve previously planted. Sometimes I’ll see them pulling weeds and cleaning up around the headstone. Mostly, they just want some quiet time in order to reflect on the life of the one they love who is no longer around. Likely you know that feeling.

Three days after Jesus had been horribly put to death and buried, a couple of his closest friends—a couple of Mary’s—came to his tomb, probably just wanting some time to catch their breath after the tragic events of the last few days and quietly remember their dear friend. Mark and Luke add that these women brought spices with them because everything had been so rushed on that Friday evening, in order for the burial to take place before the sabbath began, that his body had not been properly prepared.

I. At Dawn

A. But peace and quiet, and the opportunity to embalm the body with spices, was the last thing they got! It began with an earthquake—an incredibly frightening experience if you’ve ever been in one. This was followed, or accompanied by, the rolling away of the heavy stone to the entrance to the tomb, which was accomplished by a white as lightening angel.

B. What, on earth, was happening? As it turns out, Good Friday was the end that wasn’t. The God who had remained maddeningly silent, even when Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was now speaking, loudly and dramatically; he was having the last word. This was not, as N. T. Wright points out, just an extraordinary display of supernatural power. What God was doing was both turning the world upside-down, and right-side up again.

II. Upside Down

A. Turning the world upside down was actually what Paul and his companions were accused of as they proclaimed that Jesus was the long-anticipated Messiah—rescuer of the world—and that he had both suffered and died, and then risen from the dead, implying that here was a ruler even greater than Caesar (Acts 17:1-9). We get some hints at the upside-down nature of the resurrection in this morning’s text.

1. The stone. As we heard, the stone had been sealed by the guards, under the direction of Pilate, with the intent of keeping Jesus in (27:66). But it had turned into a seat of triumph for the angel. I can almost hear the angel saying to the guards, “You ain’t seen nothin yet!” The guards wouldn’t see “nothin” because there was “nuthin to see!” Jesus was no longer there. In point of fact, the angel had rolled the stone away, not to let Jesus out, but to bear witness to the reality that the tomb was now empty.

2. The guards. Speaking of the guards, those, likely, battle-tested men who were used to fearful situations had never experienced anything quite like this. They began to shake with fear and collapsed or even fainted. The great, upside-down irony was that those assigned to guard the dead became themselves as dead while the dead one became alive. And it is possible to remain as dead, and continue to live as dead men, denying and covering up the truth, as these fellows went on to do (28:11-15).

3. The women. Not that the women were free from fear. These were extraordinary events. The women were close to losing their grip. But the angel encouraged them not to fear, like the guards had, but to remember all that Jesus had said and promised. And then Jesus himself appeared to them and encouraged them not to fear and so their fear became accompanied by joy as something deep within them began to recognize that all they had hoped for in Jesus was actually beginning to come true. The fact that they clasped his feet as they worshipped him, affirming that the resurrection was not some kind of spiritual vision they were experiencing but was a real bodily event that had happened, certainly must have contributed to their joy.

4. Galilee. The meeting place both the angel and Jesus instructed the women to pass along to his disciples was Galilee. Not the holy, sacred city of Jerusalem but Galilee of the Gentiles. The good news of the resurrection, and all that it would bring, was for all nations, Gentile and Jew.

So, through all sorts of contrasts and unexpected twists and turns, we see God doing the unexpected, turning things upside-down, getting our attention. In addition, if we step back and take a broader view, we could also say that what God was (and is) up to in the resurrection was turning the world right-side up again, restoring his good and beautiful creation. Consider...

III. Right-Side Up

A. Last summer I sent a picture to a friend from the Midwest that I had taken of one of my favorite mountain ranges – the Franconia Ridge in the White Mountains of NH. I had taken the picture while hiking up North and South Kinsman, so looking across to the Ridge from the west. I have to say, it was a great shot! My friend agreed...in fact, she replied, “It’s so beautiful, it hurts!”

B. Have you ever had that experience, that feeling, looking at something so beautiful that it hurts? I confess that while I can feel that “hurt” inside me, I am hard pressed to explain it. But here are a couple of thoughts.

1. On the one hand, I think beauty can cause a kind of ache that hurts because we find ourselves longing for more but can never really get enough to be fully satisfied. Beauty kind of slips through our fingers. It fades and dims. We find that it is exquisite, yet sadly incomplete.

2. On the other hand, the ache that we feel when we truly behold beauty could come also, I think, from the reality that not all is as beautiful as it should be. While God has created a good and beautiful world, with everything designed to work rightly with everything else, from our relationship with Him, to our relationships with one another, to our relationship with creation,

God's world has become so marred that instead of goodness and beauty, we experience pain and anguish, despair and death, all of which we are reminded by our news feeds on an almost daily basis! The Christian story observes that this marring, this turn away from beauty, comes as a result of human beings not content to let God be in charge, but wanting to take charge on our own. Instead of living for and serving God and others, we live for and seek to serve ourselves.

C. Fortunately, the story doesn't stop there. In an incredible plot twist, it continues with a God who loves his creation so much that he decides, remarkably, to enter it in the person of his Son. Through this Son's life - in which he shows us how to live, his death - in which he deals with our sin, and his resurrection - in which he begins to do something incredibly new, God begins to make all things beautiful again, he begins to turn things right-side up, working toward a new creation in which there will be no more crying or pain or suffering or death.

D. What's more, in all of this, Jesus invites us to participate in what he is doing, as agents and ambassadors of the goodness and beauty he is restoring, seeking to live out the prayer he taught us: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

So, as we notice and experience beauty on this day and in this season, maybe we can allow it to be an echo of a voice that calls us to meet the One who spoke beauty into being, to consider what he's done for us, and what he desires to do in us and through us. And in all of this, to look forward to the day when his restoration project, begun at the resurrection, will be complete, when all will be totally right-side up, and beauty will no longer hurt because God himself will fully satisfy our deepest longings.