

## AN IDLE TALE

Isaiah 25:6-9 Luke 24:1-12

April 4, 2010 J. S. O'Neill

**Isaiah 25:6-9** <sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. <sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; <sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken. <sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

**Luke 24:1-12** But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup> They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup> but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup> While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup> The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. <sup>6</sup> Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup> that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." <sup>8</sup> Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup> and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup> Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. <sup>11</sup> But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup> But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

I enjoy abstract art. It challenges me, often delights me, and engages my imagination. When I limit myself to music that is melodious and view scenes that are tailored and tame, my imagination is dulled and my appetite for the new, the novel, and the fresh is reduced. My aesthetic philosophy was seriously tried, however, when I visited a modern art museum and had a close encounter with a sculpture that was an indecipherable conglomeration of steel, plastic, lights, and whistles. The thing was called *Exercise One*, and it caused me to shudder that I might enter the next gallery and possibly face *Exercise Two*.

I enjoy challenging creations, but I know what critic Harold Rosenberg meant when he labeled some pieces "anxious objects." Art can connect us, but also disconnect us, to normal experience. It can soothe and it can jar,

confirm us in old styles and comfortable truths or force us into a darkness where a new star can guide us. Anxious objects – bless them! – have the capacity to open us and change us, ready or not.

Perhaps that's Easter's function. It is God's inharmonious note, God's dissonant climactic chord, an anxious object which jars us out of our favorite versions of how things work and shatters the bored complacency we have achieved through immersion in the ordinary and expected. Easter is a flipping of the spiritual autopilot switch to "off" – that switch most of us have set in order to not have to soar too high nor sink too low in spiritual adventure. So, here comes Easter arriving like a clown at a fancy dress ball – uninvited, out of place, and not a little bit offensive, and we deal with it like those stupefied disciples who stumbled over their feet and stammered over their words and dismissed the women's report of an empty tomb as just so much idle talk.

Actually, the whole gospel story is an attack on convention. It's a jumble of startling, incongruous claims that craze the smooth surface of sense. It jolts the mind and shocks us into the recognition that something new and strange is at work here. If we've been following the story all along, the ending shouldn't surprise us in the least. Was there not sufficient shock in Jesus' teaching that the last shall be first and the first last? Was there not the strongest intimation that the gospel is strange and contrary when we first heard him say love and forgive your enemies, or turn the other cheek to those who strike you? Is Easter more incredible than hearing that God loves the prodigal even before he repents; that wealth is an obstacle to the kingdom; that the more careless a society is regarding the poor and marginalized, the farther that society is from God's favor; that anger is an agent of murder and fear is a form of idolatry; that the more desperately we hold on to life, money, possessions, stratagems, and ideologies which we

think make us good, the further we grow from grace?

Easter is an anxious object, a close encounter with the deeply disturbing. Easter befits the kind of God who has from the beginning declared, "Behold, I am doing something new," and proceeded to turn the world's common assumptions on its collective ear.

It is a collective ear that does not listen well. Here we are acting as though it's all very normal, this thing we call faith, and very commonplace this faith we call Christianity. We don't seem to even blink at the incongruity of it all. Long ago Dorothy Sayers observed,

*God was executed by people painfully like us, in a society very similar to our own — in the over-ripeness of the most splendid and sophisticated Empire the world had ever seen. ...He was executed by a corrupt church, a timid politician, and a fickle proletariat led by professional agitators. His executioners made vulgar jokes about Him, called Him filthy names, taunted Him, smacked Him in the face, flogged Him with the cat, and hanged Him on the common gibbet - a bloody, dusty, sweaty, and sordid business. It is curious that people who are filled with horrified indignation whenever a cat kills a sparrow can hear that story of the killing of God told Sunday after Sunday and not experience any shock at all."*

Are we left inert and unmoved? Has familiarity with the story pulled its teeth? Pollsters have asked who was executed on Good Friday, and a majority of Americans don't know. They ask what Easter Sunday celebrates, and most haven't the faintest. Those facts are anxious objects

in and of themselves, suggesting that the way those of us who do know are not living in sufficiently colorful, creative, surprising ways so that others' imaginations are quickened. Easter is no longer an anxious object for most; it's a domesticated one decorated in pastels, sweetened with chocolate, and lifeless as a boiled egg. We have harmonized its dissonance, muted its colors, and subverted its meaning from judgment against a death-dealing empire to a marketing campaign.

If the anxious object of Easter has lost its ability to disturb us, how can Christians disturb the world? If Christians are living in such ways that they merely provoke indifference, ignorance, and denial in others, what good are we? William Coffin said, "If you ask me if Jesus literally raised Lazarus from the dead, literally walked on water, and changed water into wine, I will answer, 'For certain, I do not know. But this I do know: faith must be lived before it is understood, and the more it is lived, the more things become possible.' I can also report that in home after home I have seen Jesus change beer into furniture, sinners into saints, hate-filled relations into loving ones, cowardice into courage, the fatigue of despair into the buoyancy of hope. In instance after instance, life after life, I have seen Christ be "God's power unto salvation," and that's miracle enough for me."

Our complacency begs for a eucatastrophe of the soul. I greeted a friend one day and asked him how things were going. My friend said things were pretty good but, "It wouldn't hurt if they were a bit better!" And I thought to myself, "And how do you know it wouldn't hurt?" We associate the word *catastrophe* with tragedy and loss. But, if we add the prefix *eu* to it, from the Greek meaning *good*, we are forced in the opposite direction, because there are events in life which look like ruin, feel like pain, and smell like disaster, but, in retrospect, prove to be good and necessary. There are patterns in life which, were they to persist without being overturned, would

ruin us, vegetating comfortably in immaturity or ignorance. Eucatastrophe is the necessary, salutary, though inconvenient and painful overturning of patterns which, if persisted in, threaten to disable us as persons of faith and of loving imagination. It is change which opens us up, reorients us in new directions, and allows God's Spirit to move us out of torpor.

The disciples' discovery of the empty tomb is not what Easter is about. All an empty tomb signifies is absence. In that respect, the women's report about it did amount to idle talk. What can one do with emptiness? God knows there are enough empty lives around, enough empty feelings, and sufficiently empty futures. No, what Easter signifies is presence, the astounding news that death couldn't contain, constrain, or confound the power of God to make things new.

We need a eucatastrophe of the soul; we need a reinvigoration of imagination; we need to be startled into a resurrection of hope. We need to be intimately connected to the audacious and erupting action of God to save us from a posture hunkered against the unhappiness of the times. Short of being claimed by a resurgence of spirit, we will be like Julian Barnes' provocative self-description, "I don't believe in God, but I miss him," or Rabbi Samuel Karff's story of the naming ceremony for a newborn when the baby's father asked, "Rabbi, do you believe in God?" "Yes," said Karff, and the man looked at his daughter and said, "I don't, but I hope she will."

What will move us from inertia to life, to acting upon the power of God to do something new? What will make this Easter a contemporary experience instead of once more being left an artifact of ancient days. The movement of Easter is from emptiness toward presence, from life hopelessly isolated and aloof to life full and engaged, from life inured and protected to life vulnerable and open. Either the testimony of Easter lives in the lives of Easter people or it doesn't live at all in any meaningful sense.

“Become, in your immediate world and however momentarily, your own reflection of a merciful Creator,” says Reynolds Price; “behave, in your suffering, as attentively and generously as you can to your immediate neighbors. Bury your self and leave only the odor of mercy behind you.” Easter is about escaping the cave of self and breathing deeply the sweet air outside the tomb. It is about witnessing through word and deed to hope. Otherwise, whatever else we do or say, in word or in deed, will be just so much idle talk.