

An Easter Beyond Belief

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, "He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." This is my message for you.' So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'

E.B White, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, the *Trumpet of the Swan*, the man who tortured thousands upon thousands of high school and college students with his book on writing style- E.B. White was a man of faith, but he was suspicious of belief. He was a man of faith- but he was suspicious of belief.

In a beautiful 1956 Essay entitled "Bedfellows" he writes this: "I hope that belief is never made to appear mandatory...I hope my country will never become an uncomfortable place for the unbeliever...My wife, a spiritual but not prayerful woman, read [the President's] call to prayer in the paper and said something I'll never forget: 'Maybe it's all right,' she said, 'but for the first time in my life I'm beginning to feel like an outsider in my own land.'" (Bedfellows in *Essays of E.B. White*, p. 108)

E.B. White is a man of faith- but he was suspicious of belief.

On this bright Easter morning I find myself feeling the same way- only, where White was talking about the nation, I feel this way about the church. To paraphrase White, I would hate, I do hate, whenever the church becomes an uncomfortable place for our unbelief.

This probably seems like a strange thing to say on Easter. After all, Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, this is THE key belief of the Christian faith, right? It's true that Christmas is more popular, gets more airplay, but I think this is because Santa is a lot easier to explain to a 5 year old than the crucifixion and resurrection. I've tried. No, it's the Easter story, this story of Christ being raised from the dead, of Christ obdurately defying death- this is the story that confounded and captivated the early church and does so to this day.

And yet for something as important as the resurrection, the only question I ever hear about it, about the resurrection is do you believe in it? Do you *believe* in the resurrection? Do you mentally agree that all evidence aside- yes, this makes a kind of sense to you?

Now, in case you aren't sure what the right answer is, this is no problem- because the church came up with little cheat sheets called creeds to help us out with exactly what we're supposed to believe. The Apostle's Creed is very helpful for example. "I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth." And it's very clear about the resurrection: "I believe in Jesus Christ his only son, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...and on the third day rose again from the dead." And later, "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Every phrase begins with 'I believe.' I believe. I believe.

Indeed the word creed itself comes from the Latin word *credo*, meaning I believe.

Now, I respect the creeds, I do. I even defend them now and again; I like having something that links us to voices who lived hundreds and hundreds of years ago. But I will admit to you that every now and again there can be something so dreary about us church people when we're standing here saying the Creed together. You know, we get into that chanting kind of monotone church voice we all get into. And then, especially when we're chanting things I'm fairly positive not everyone even understands much less really believes- it feels to me like our hearts are a billion miles away.

Now it's not that I disagree with the creeds- I do believe in the resurrection. I'm just not sure that *believing* in the resurrection is the most important thing. I'm not sure that asking whether we believe in the resurrection is really the best question.

Take Matthew's Gospel this morning. The dawn is just breaking on the Sabbath morning. And the women stumble through the darkness towards the tomb. It's not entirely clear why they go. They aren't going to anoint the body, like they do in Mark- they know the tomb is sealed and guarded. So Matthew says they go to see the tomb. I think they go just to be near to him, because sometimes when you can't do anything else for someone you love, you can at least be close to them.

But then what happens? The earth shakes, and the tomb is torn open, and they see this angel perched on the stone that has been rolled away from the tomb. The guards are lying scattered on the ground like toppled trees. And the angel tells the women everything that's happened- he tells them not to be afraid, that yes, Jesus was crucified, but that has been raised.

Now, if the resurrection is just about belief, if the women had paid attention when they were learning the Apostle's Creed in Sunday school- then this message from the angel would have been enough. The angel would have told them Jesus had been raised, it would have gone into their ears and into their brains, and they would have believed, and then they would have gone to tell the others. No problem.

But they don't. This isn't what happened. When the angel tells them Jesus has been raised, they must have had this look on their faces- like "Huh? Because after the angel tells them he's been raised, they just keep standing there. They don't just hear and automatically believe. And so he tells them, "Fine, come and see- come and see where he lay, come and see with their own eyes that he isn't there anymore."

If the resurrection is just about belief, just about mental assent, agreement- they wouldn't have needed to see he wasn't there. They just would have run off to spread the good news. They would have heard and believed and this belief would have been enough to lead them into action.

But this isn't what happens. They hear the story. But then they test it out. They aren't sure- they don't just believe. Only after seeing Jesus isn't there- only after seeing that do they leave.

And it's the same when the disciples see Jesus. Matthew says the disciples climb up to this high place in the Galilee. And there Jesus comes to them- he appears, right there big as life. And then Matthew says that the disciples, THE DISCIPLES- the guys who left everything they ever knew to follow after Jesus, who lived with him, ate with him, watched him do miracle after miracle. When the disciples see him- Matthew says

some worship, but some doubt. Some worship, but some doubt? Literally in Greek the term is this means they are unbelievers, nonbelievers.

And what does Jesus do- does he go crazy on these unbelieving disciples? Does he tell them to get out of there? Does he subject them to an inquisition and put some creed before them and say only the people who can sign on are welcome to continue? No, he doesn't even seem to notice. He doesn't say a word about it.

He just keeps on talking and to all of them, to the believers and to the unbelievers both- he says, "Go and do." Go and do. Go and teach others to live like he did. Go and baptize, pouring the water of life over heads telling people of God's grace and love. And most importantly go and show people to live like he did- loving the unlovable, touching the untouchable, and befriending the least, the last, and the lost. *In Matthew Jesus doesn't ask us to believe in the resurrection- he asks us to do it, to be it, to live it.*

And really, isn't this just the way life is? None of us start out understanding and believing in the world and THEN start living and experiencing it. It's always the other way around. We're always living and experiencing, and our beliefs follow. And when our experience changes- hopefully, our beliefs change, too. This is called growth.

A lot of you know that Melis has been having a more challenging time with this third pregnancy. Making the baby out to sound like a misbehaving golf ball, the doctors say she has what they call an 'unstable lie'. So she's been flipping around like gymnast going from head down to breach more times than we can count. And of course breach is not what you want- you either wind up with a risky delivery or c-section.

So, one of the main things they told us to do is what's called moxibustion. What is that? Moxibustion is in the same family as acupuncture- only instead of using needles you use heat. And so they have these awful things called moxi sticks that are like giant cigar shaped incense that you light on fire. And then you hold them over certain spots to get the energy flowing.

Well, for getting a baby to flip, the points are the outside of the pinky toe, where nail meets flesh. So, if you can imagine this, every night we've known the baby is flipped the wrong way, Melis lays down, and I sit at her feet with my bbq lighter and moxi sticks. And after I fire those babies up, then it's like an episode of 24, and I'm Kiefer Sutherland holding these burning sticks an inch or so away from Melis' toes as if to tell this baby, "Look little girl, if I'm willing to do this to your mom- imagine what I'm willing to do to *you*. Now FLIP!"

And of course it's not like the stupid moxi sticks stay the same temperature- no, they start out hot, then cool down, then you have to knock the ash off or heat them up again. So I'm constantly asking things like, "How is it on the left? How about the right?" And Melis does her best, but sometimes the sticks heat up so fast she's like, "It's good...Dah- too hot!" "Ok, it's fine again...Yeeeah- too hot!" Once, it got so hot on the left, she instinctively kicked her foot away so fast, she knocks into the right foot- pushing it out right into the stick getting a producing a REALLY interesting reaction. And I'm sitting there thinking if anybody was to walk in on this- I mean you would wrestle me to the ground and put me in jail.

Now, if you ask us do we BELIEVE in this? Do we agree that it makes sense and understand what's going on, and trust in some kind of creedal way that this is helpful?

Um...uh...NO. So not. I mean there is zero part of me that thinks, “Why yes, of course- it makes perfect sense to me that smoking Melis’ pinky toes will cause this baby to flip.” No, I don’t know I believe in it- but that’s not what’s important. What’s important is that we’ve done it. We’ve done it because it might help. And there is no way we’re not going to do everything within our power to help.

Do you believe in the resurrection? Do you believe in it? Does it make sense to you? I tell you- a better question this Easter morning is this- not do you believe in the resurrection, but where have you seen it? Where have you seen the resurrection? Where have you lived resurrection? Where have you been dead inside or you’ve seen someone else ground down, and burnt out, and hope-less, and then, because of something someone said, or did, or because of a gentle breeze on their cheek, or because of some reason you can’t even put a name to- you somehow find yourself or saw that other person coming to life again?

E.B. White mentioned his wife, Katherine in the earlier piece about belief. Like her husband, Katherine was also a writer. For most of her life she edited the New Yorker magazine. Her main passion in life, though was gardening. The only book she ever published was called, “Onward and Upward in the Garden”.

Well, in the last months of her life, when she had become very ill, E.B. White remembers looking out the windows, the thick, old glass windows of their farmhouse in Maine to see his wife in the garden. He writes this: “There she would sit, hour after hour, in the wind and the weather, with dozens of brown paper packages of new bulbs

and basketfuls of old ones, ready for the intricate interment...there was something comical yet touching in her bedraggled appearance...the small hunched-over figure, her studied absorption in the implausible notion that there would be yet another spring, oblivious to the ending of her own days, which she knew perfectly well was near at hand, sitting there with her detailed chart under those dark skies in the dying of the light, calmly plotting the resurrection.”

Don't ask E.B. White if he believes in the resurrection- he's seen it. He's seen it.

Beloved. On this Easter morning hear the good news. Jesus is alive and well and on the loose. And if you believe and if you doubt- may we all leave this place hoping for it, looking for it, longing for it. And not as some doctrine to agree with, but as a living, unruly reality, a reality that comes to life through old women planting bulbs, husbands burning pregnant women's toes, and in anyone anywhere who acts in kindness not because they're sure it's a good idea, but precisely because they aren't, but do it anyway.

Amen.