

## An Inside Job

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Jeremiah 31:1-14; Colossians 3:1-11; Matthew 28:1-15

“. . . You have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator.” -- Colossians 3:9-10

The other night I was watching one of my cop shows that you all know about after my confession of a couple of weeks ago, and this was a new one to Ion Television. It's called "The Listener." Anybody a fan of "The Listener"? Toby Logan isn't a cop, he's a paramedic, but he works with the cops as a kind of special consultant, and what makes his consultancy special is his ability to hear people's thinking. Toby can eavesdrop on people's thoughts, and he shares that information with the police, and the criminals can't figure out how the cops have become so smart all of a sudden.

So the episode the other night found Toby in the middle of a bank robbery. Mr. Eye Candy had made it back to the sidewalk, but while he was waiting for his partner to buy both of them lunch at the hot dog cart across the street, Toby notices that the bank he was just in moments before now has its lobby windows papered over and a sign on the door saying "Closed for Renovation."

Well, Toby, who's not just another pretty face riding shotgun in the meat wagon, heads back into the bank to see what's up and becomes the bank robbers' final hostage.

You know how these things go. Police cars and a SWAT team come screaming from across town. Snipers appear on nearby roofs, scopes aimed at the bank's front door. Telephone contact is established between the head robber and the police negotiator. Demands are made, a deal is brokered, and out of the bank's front door shuffles what looks like a football huddle turned inside out, with the hostages forming a protective ring around the robbers.

The getaway vehicle is idling nearby, the robbers and a couple of hostages jump in a peel rubber away from downtown, and when the police surround them just blocks later, the authorities discover only a fraction of the bank vault's money in the van; the five million or so that was supposed to be in the vault has been stolen by someone else, and at that moment the cops realize that the robbers had help from someone working at the bank. It was, as the saying goes, an inside job.

That's essentially what some people concluded about the resurrection of Jesus – it had to be an inside job. Matthew, and only Matthew, reports the bribing of the guards by the religious authorities who found the guards' tale of the descending angel, the earthquake, and Jesus's resurrection impossible to believe. Confronted with the news of the empty tomb, the chief priests and the elders had to provide the people with a more plausible explanation of events than resurrection, and the explanation they provided was that Jesus's disciples had stolen his body while the guards slept, and the guards are supposed to back up this fabrication by admitting to having been asleep at their post, not

something you'd ordinarily want known about yourself if you make your living keeping watch. But the religious authorities assure the guards that if this concocted story of sleeping guards and burgling disciples reaches the governor's ears, the guards are not to worry – the chief priests will take care of it.

And that explanation of the resurrection, Matthew says, circulated among the Jews "to this day," that is to say, from the first Easter until Matthew's gospel was committed to writing about half a century later.

Now, at this point, I have to issue my usual warning about Christians reading the New Testament's remarks about "the Jews" as though the writers of the New Testament understood Christians to be the good guys because we got that Jesus was the Messiah and the Jews – all the Jews – are the bad guys because they didn't. That's not right.

When we're talking about events from the life of Jesus, the contrast in the New Testament is not between Jews and Christians, because there aren't any Christians at that time. Christians as a separate religion don't appear until decades after Jesus's death and resurrection, so the distinction in the New Testament, including Matthew's account of Jesus' resurrection, is between disagreeing Jews: those Jews who saw in Jesus their promised Messiah and his inauguration of the Messianic age, and those Jews who did not. When we Christians read the Easter story, we have to remember that we're eavesdropping, a bit like Toby Logan, on a spiritual and religious disagreement of which we were not yet a part.

So Easter morning finds one group of Jews – Matthew calls them the chief priests and elders – trying to discredit the miraculous spiritual experience of another group of Jews – the followers of Jesus – and the first group does so, according to the second group, by bribing their own witnesses to the miracle to say that it was an inside job.

Happily for us, it was.

That's exactly what the resurrection was – it was an inside job, but not in the way Jesus's opponents tried to discredit it and not in the way that Jesus's followers tried to defend it. The inside job that made the resurrection the life-changing and world-changing event that it was and remains today was not what happened inside the tomb, but rather what happened inside the disciples. That's where the experience of the risen Jesus Christ changed them and gave them the power, in turn, to change the world. If you're looking for Easter, look inside, because that's where you'll find it.

Now, I know, of course, that this is wishy-washy liberal prevarication for both our secular friends and our fundamentalist friends. Both groups want the truth of Easter to reside in the facts, ma'am, just the facts, as Joe Friday used to say. Skeptics and hard-core believers both believe in the facts to save them. I don't. I believe in Jesus Christ to save me, to save you, to save them, and to save the world. And Jesus Christ is not a fact; Jesus Christ is an experience that must be lived to be believed.

Looking for Easter out there – whether it be an empty tomb or a piece of the true cross or the Shroud of Turin – is a forlorn errand, because that's not where Easter is to be found. Easter – the miracle of a new and better kind of life, the kind of life God always intended human life to be – if Easter's to be anything more than a conjuring trick with bones, as the one-time bishop of Durham famously put it some years back, it HAS to be an inside job, because the women and men who changed the world then and change it still today do so from the inside out.

God may very well get our attention with a miracle – a burning bush, a virgin birth, an angel announcing "He is risen" – but God gets things done in this world by making people new. That's the miracle of Easter.

That's the miracle that no one can explain. I mean, honestly. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is so far-fetched an idea, why would anyone take it seriously – as an idea? At

this level, the level of weighing options and considering likelihoods, the chief priests and the elders have by far the stronger case. At the level of how things ordinarily work, the resurrection HAD to be an inside job and in the nefarious sense of that word. If your goal is to prove how an empty tomb became empty, and no one's 'fessing up, the most likely reason is theft.

But what have you got when you've demonstrated that? A handful of empty tomb. The conviction of nothing. The power of a void.

That's where argument and logic and reason take you when you apply them to Easter. They take you nowhere. They take you to implausibility, impossibility, the same old same old, business as usual.

But that's not what happened on Easter. Something that the followers of Jesus called his life-with-them-again happened. Jesus's followers were convinced that God had raised him from the dead to begin, with them, that new way of being in the world that we call God's realm or the kingdom of heaven or the end times or the Messianic age – take your pick. Whatever term you prefer, the one essential ingredient is you – the changed you, the new you, the you that you never imagined you could be. That's what Easter launched – the age of women and men living freed from the bonds of the way they had lived before. That power was available to them then, it's available to us now. That's Easter, and that's most assuredly an inside job.

That's also what Paul or someone writing on Paul's behalf to the Colossian church was trying to say by reminding the Colossian Christians that they were no longer their old selves. Those old selves, marked by that catalog of vices Barb read for us a little while ago – fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, greed (which is idolatry) – the selves that lived that way died with Christ when the Colossians underwent the rite of Christian baptism, that once-powerful symbol of dying to an old way of life and rising to a new way of life.

And that new way of life is both the pattern and the gift of Jesus Christ. We earnest Midwestern Protestant Christians, who try so hard to make ourselves new – we've got it all backwards! It's not we who make ourselves new, but rather it's God's Holy Spirit working in us that makes us new. We have a role to play, of course, because the first step in living a new life in Christ is wanting that new life. You and I are just like that light bulb in the old joke: to change, we have to want to be changed. And the reason we have to want to be changed is because love, which does the changing, does not coerce. It waits, it stands at the door and knocks, but it never kicks the door open and forces itself in.

It always baffles me when kindhearted but muddle-headed Christians wail, "Why doesn't God DO something?" by which they mean do something to change the behavior of people behaving badly. And the answer is always the same: love does not coerce. At the heart of all true and authentic love is freedom – the freedom to behave badly, the freedom not to reciprocate love when it's offered, the freedom not to love at all, which is undoubtedly the greatest tragedy a human being can suffer.

At our Maundy Thursday supper the other night, our table was discussing the case of Edmond Aviv, aged sixty-two, and a resident of South Euclid, who was convicted of harassing a neighboring family in the most sordid and racist sort of way for fifteen years. Last Sunday morning, on my way to church, I passed Edmond Aviv at the corner of Trebisky Road and Monticello Boulevard, where a judge had ordered him to sit with a sign telling passers-by that he is an intolerant bully who picks on handicapped children. Once you get past the question of whether the man was receiving nothing more than his just deserts, the question that saddens me in the asking is, "What happened in that man's childhood to produce someone so filled with anger and so empty of the love of God?"

I didn't feel particularly sorry for Edmond Aviv as he had to admit to what his actions had made him, but I did feel tremendous sadness at the spectacle of an unconverted life – an old self, in the Colossians sense of that word – on public display.

This old-self, new-self business is real, friends, as real as Easter. Our world is plagued by people living out of their old selves – pick up the paper or turn on the BBC News and see – and on Easter morning, the old evangelical in me lumbers out of his den with a roar. There are lots of ways to get through this life, and living a life transformed by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is one of the best. I'm not going to compare such a life to a life lived as a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Sikh, or a Jew. That's not my business, it's not your business, it's not anybody's business except God's business.

But you don't have to engage in odious comparisons of the world's religions to see plenty of evidence that life without Jesus Christ is often a great deal worse than life with Jesus Christ. There are millions upon millions of people who are completely clueless about what it means to be a true human being, and what I said in my Good Friday message I'll say again: God did not become human to show us what God looks like. God became a human being to show us what being human looks like. What we're supposed to look like. Fully loving, fully responsive to the world and God, fully alive. The glory of God, the church father Irenaeus said in the second century, is a human being fully alive. If you want to know what such a human being looks like, look to the one who called himself simply The Human One, Jesus the Christ.

How different, friends, would places like Syria, Nigeria, the Ukraine, Israel and Palestine, the border between Mexico and the United States, and especially Washington DC would look like if the actors there were living the selves it's possible for them to live in Jesus Christ? I'm not suggesting for one minute that they all become Christian – God forbid! We Christians have made such a mess of the new life offered to us in Jesus Christ I'd never suggest that Christianity is the only path to that new life.

But what I am going to suggest, today, tomorrow, and all the days I have left on this planet, is that the life embodied in the Human One, a life of love so devoted to God and the world that death itself could not end it, that life is yours for the taking, for the living, and for the sharing. There have been plenty of moments in my life when I've been ashamed to be a Christian – other Christians did that – but I've never been ashamed to call myself a follower of Jesus Christ. And I never will be. And I hope you can say the same.

Every little political machine and every boot-stomping, gun-toting empire, and every tin-pot dictator able to sway the masses with promises of salvation through force have all believed themselves the final solution to the world's troubles and they've all been wrong. They've all risen, they've all had their sometimes horrible day, and they've all passed away.

But quietly and gently, in a little suburban church in northeast Ohio, decorated with the beauty of God's creation, Easter goes on, as it has for over two thousand years. You and I, in our own sincere and imperfect way, are giving flesh and blood to the eternal Word of God in our little patch. As best we can, day in and day out, in small ways and great, we're trying to live that new life, those new selves, given to us by Jesus, the Human One. And that really does make Easter an inside job.