

THE BASKET WHERE WE PUT OUR EGGS

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John 20:1-18

In first century Israel the practice of burial was a two-stage process. When a person died their body was placed in a tomb or a sealed cave much like we read of how Jesus was buried. He was buried in a sealed tomb. But the problem was there were a limited number of these tombs and caves. As the population grew in Jerusalem they were soon running out spaces to bury people ... there were only a certain amount of caves that could be used for burial -- kind of like running out of ground in a cemetery. So there became a need to reuse them. One of the first evidences of recycling. So the practice became that a year after burial -- once the body had turned to just bones -- the tomb was entered and the bones were gathered and placed in a burial box called an ossuary. A box about 2 ½ long and 1 ¼ feet wide and 1 ½ feet high. This ossuary, or burial box, was then placed in a niche inside the burial cave along with many, many other similar boxes. Archaeologists over the last couple hundred years have been discovering many of these 1st century burial boxes. If you were to visit the Israel museum in Jerusalem you would see the ossuary of Caiaphas the chief priest who presided over the trial of Jesus.

Close to a dozen years ago another one of these burial boxes was discovered in Israel that dates to 63 AD and it contained the inscription in Aramaic -- "James, son of Joseph, brother of Jesus". It was for a while held to be the burial box of James the brother of Jesus of Nazareth. Questions though got raised as to the veracity of the claim and possible forgery, investigations followed, trials were held - the most recent

this past year – and at the end of the day no verdicts were reached about the burial box of James, the brother of Jesus. Most scholars doubt it was the burial box of James. Some hold out for the possibility that it is.

But all this, of course, prompts an obvious question – that usually pops up in some journal at this time of the year – and the question is this: What would happen if tomorrow in some archaeological dig in or around Jerusalem they came upon an ossuary with an inscription that read: “Jesus, son of Joseph, brother of James”? That is to say ... what if what they had found had been the burial box of Jesus? You don’t need a burial box for a man who’s been raised after three days. You only need one for a man who’s been dead for a year. What would it matter to you ... if they had conclusively found the box of Jesus’ bones?

Now your internal response right now to that question may already be telling you something. The proposition that Jesus did not walk out of the tomb – what does it do to you? What does it create within you? Maybe it’s a feeling of disquiet. Maybe it’s a sense of despair. Or on the other hand, maybe it’s a shrug of the shoulders. Maybe it’s indifference. Maybe you haven’t thought much about it. What does it matter this story of Jesus outside the tomb in the garden speaking to Mary?

I am guessing – with all these lilies and people and instruments and Easter outfits and brunch plans – I am guessing this story has to mean something. In fact to read the New Testament, and to read the last two centuries of the history of Western Civilization -- it seems this story matters a great deal. Permit me to suggest this day that the story of the empty tomb and the appearance of Jesus and the recognition of Mary -- it matters more than anything in your life. It matters more than your deepest worry right now. It matters more than your biggest plan right now. It matters more

than what is going on in your 401K. It matters more than what is going on in your business. It matters more than what is happening in world affairs. The resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of our very existence.

Now the reason that the resurrection of Jesus is at the heart of our very existence is because it is the answer to a question that every one of us is going to ask ... if we haven't asked it already -- and that question is ... "What is the meaning and purpose of life? What does it matter that I have lived? What will happen to me when my heart stops beating? What will be the moral to the story once I've been buried?"

Because you know what? Life on this earth is very short. It is very, very short. With every passing day ... life seems all the shorter. And there is something I think we all we want to know -- we all want to know what end we are playing to. Every one of us plays to an end. Every script that is written is written with an end in mind. And I don't know about you ... but I want to know what ending I am playing to.

Some are playing to the end of the week. "Everybody's Working For the Weekend," or so the song goes. Is that the end you are playing to? Some are playing to the end of the quarter ... the fiscal quarter. Got to get my numbers up for the end of the quarter. Others are playing to the end of the year. This year I'm hoping will be better than last year. We have a big party at the end of the year. Some are playing to the end of their careers. It's all about the 401K. Others are playing to the end of their health. They are doing all they can to hold onto their health as long as they can. And still others are playing to the end of their breath. They have plans to their dying day. Everyone has an end in mind. It is important to know what end you are playing to.

So wind back again to the first century and the predominate view of life was that it ended at the grave. Think of that ... you are living in a culture that had no reason to believe that their lives went any further past the grave. Every funeral was an ending. No talk of “being in a better place” ... no talk of seeing each other again ... no talk of the peace which passes all understanding. None of that. The grave was the end. The very best end you could play to ... was to your last earthly breath. A year later they would be collecting your bones.

But then a woman named Mary decides one morning to take a walk through a cemetery — a place where everybody is supposed to have met their end. But then all of a sudden there is an empty tomb. But then all of a sudden there is a dead man walking. Empty tomb, dead man walking ... you put the two together and you start wondering. And then she hears a name. She hears the name Mary. And she sees that it’s the dead man walking calling her name. And she sees that it’s Jesus. She sees that it is the good shepherd who knows all his sheep by name. And he’s called her name. And when she sees the empty tomb, and the dead man walking calling her name — now all of a sudden she sees that this cemetery is no longer the place of endings.

Now there is a whole other end to play to! Now there’s a heaven. Now there is a “better place”. Now there is a peace which passes all understanding. Now there is a house not made with hands eternal in the heavens. Now there is an end that doesn’t have an ending!

And before you know it there is this group of people who start playing their life to a different ending! Now there is this group of people who see that the days on the earth are but a prelude. Now there is this group of people who are starting to put

their eggs ... all their eggs in one basket. They are playing for heaven now. Their business on earth is now the business of heaven. They're betting the farm ... and they are betting on heaven. And they start doing these marvelously wonderful and courageous acts of love ... giving no thought to the dangers or the risks -- why? Because they are playing to a different ending. They are playing for heaven. That's the basket they're putting all their eggs into.

So what basket are you putting your eggs into? What in heaven's name is your life all about? To what end are you playing? Because you know I'm wondering if your life and mine isn't a little like a horserace. Have you ever turned on the TV and watched a horserace like the Kentucky Derby? And what you see are these horses ... these beautiful horses ... and as a preliminary to the race they are paraded around the track. Up to that point their lives have been trained for this moment. They have submitted themselves to the hand of a trainer. They have circled the track thousands of times to condition and to prepare. And then comes the moment when they must be put in the gate. And they don't like the gate. They resist the gate. They even back away from the gate. But it is to the gate they must go. It is for the gate that they have been trained. For when they come to the gate and they enter the gate and the door is closed behind them -- it is only then that they hear the bell ... and the front of the gate is open ... and they are off! They are off and out of the gate ... and they are doing what they had been bred and trained to do. They are off and running.

And I wonder if that isn't a little of what the resurrection is all about. That when death comes it's like entering the gate. And if we have played it right ... all our life has been a training for the gate. And the gate, of course, is death. And we resist death. We back away from death. We kick at death. Maybe because we think it is the end. But it's not the end. Because when we finally get in the gate ...and the door

closes behind us ... it's then and only then when the bell rings — and the gate in front opens ... and we are off ... we're finally off. And we are doing the very thing we were created for.

Oh what joy that gives me when I think of those I've loved who have gone before me in death. To think how much I wanted to hold them back ... how much I wanted them to stay longer — how much I wanted to hold them back from the gate — but to think that in Jesus Christ what I would have held them back from. I would hold them back from the bell.

Do you remember that last scene in the last book of the Chronicles of Narnia? It's the book called *The Last Battle* and at the end — all the faithful characters of all the stories have died — and they are no longer in Narnia ... but they are gathered in another place with Aslan — the great Lion. But they are not really sure what has happened. And Aslan explains to them that they've died. And he explains it this way: "The term is over; the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning." And then Lewis writes: "As he spoke he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. (Because) for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever; in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Oh friends, on this Easter Sunday, I suspect we have all kinds of baskets into which we are placing our eggs. There may be all sorts of ends to which we are living our lives — but today the story is that a dead man has come to life. His name is

Jesus. And he calls a name and it's ours. He knows all his sheep by name. And he says I have a new ending for you ... one that never ends. With all that you are doing ... and with all that you've done --- it's just the cover and the title page. The real story is yet to start.

Oh who we might be and what we might do ... if we really knew ... if we really believed ... that our earthly journey was just the title page? Oh who we might be and what we might do ... if we understood that our journey to the gate ... is only for us to hear the bell!