

The Easter Effect

Dr. Hmingi Browne

 Acts 9:1-19

In the spring of 1997, Will and I led a small-group mission trip to India. It was a small group and, except for the two of us, no one had been to India before. Among the group there was a self-proclaimed video camera-man by the name of Ralph. These were the days when video cameras were bulky and came with an attached microphone.

Ralph was very faithful in taking videos of every possible interesting sight. Gradually Will and I became aware of the fact that, as he video-taped, Ralph recorded a running commentary. It was great fun to listen to him because he really had little idea of what he was seeing. But, that did not stop him. To Ralph:

- The Taj Mahal became a palace instead of a tomb;
- A political party procession became a wedding;
- A wedding became a band concert;
- Sorghum apparently grew in the middle of a mustard field;
- And, a brick factory became a stadium under construction.

As we listened to Ralph, we realized he was applying his American experiences to the interpretation of what he was seeing in India.

Then, of course, from a story source I dearly love, we have wonderful stories of struggling to understand what one is seeing. These have titles like: “Piglet meets a Heffalump” and “In which Pooh and Piglet go hunting and nearly catch a Woozle”. The scariest story of all is, “Tigger comes to the forest and has breakfast.”

This story is scariest because Tigger is not imaginary. He is real and he bounces into other creatures. He arrives hungry and says everyone’s favorite food is his favorite food ...until he tries it. Fortunately for everyone else and for Roo, Tigger really only likes Roo’s medicine.

And, of course, different people who have these stories read to them hear and understand them differently. They may think a Pooh story is actually about Piglet. Or, they may think Pooh is a silly old bear when he is really very brave.

The story of Saul on the road to Damascus from Acts chapter 9 is also a story that can be understood in different ways. In the past, I have read this scripture as a conversion story.

Saul of Tarsus is converted by God’s intervention to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. And, to stop persecuting the followers of Jesus. It could also be read as the last of the “Easter Resurrection Appearance stories.” Or we could read it as a “sending story” in which God sends Ananias to rescue the blinded Saul.

Story as Conversion Story

There is a wonderful saying my husband, Will, quotes often, “the greatest obstacle to knowledge is what you think you already know.” [1] What makes conversion difficult is that we hold so tightly onto what we think we ‘already know.’ We ended up blinding ourselves from learning new and more helpful ways. For there to be a real conversion, a revolution of how we think is required. [2] Revolutions are hard work. Most of us would rather stay the way we are. We would rather not convert.

In our story in Acts chapter 9 we have the religious fanatic, named Saul, on his way to persecute Christians near Damascus - as he had persecuted them in Jerusalem. Saul believed that:

“We are Easter people. We are a people who believe in the Risen Jesus.”

- God chose and loved the Jewish people;
- God rescued and led them;
- God tested and disciplined them;
- God promised a Messiah to bring a new world order;
- And God called his people to be faithful and obedient.

Saul believed Jesus could not be the Messiah because Jesus did not lead an army or unite the country or defeat the Romans.

Jesus failed and was killed. To Saul the idea of a resurrection was foolish and delusional. It was impossible. Saul was convinced that it was his duty to stop the Christians from teaching the resurrection story.

So, God intervened and stopped Saul from persecuting Christians. God appeared to Saul in a brilliant vision and Saul saw the risen and living Jesus and he hears Jesus speak to him. From the moment Saul understands Jesus is really risen, he knows all of his old ways of thinking are wrong. He sees the risen Jesus and everything is different. Saul is a convert.

Story As Easter Resurrection Appearance Story

Some scholars suggest this story is the last of the major Easter Resurrection Appearance stories. The women were the first to see Jesus. The apostles and disciples in various grouping and settings

see Jesus. Many people, we are told, saw the risen Jesus. Saul, certainly thought that what happened to him on the road to Damascus was a resurrection appearance.

Saul said in 1 Corinthians 15:8, “last of all, as to one untimely born, Jesus appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”

George Wiegler, a Roman Catholic theologian and commentator wrote an article in *The Washington Post* this Easter called “The Easter Effect.” He said that the rapid growth of Christianity can only be explained by the effect seeing the risen Jesus had on people.

Once you see the risen Jesus and believed, your whole life is turned upside down. The way you see the world is changed. The meaning and purpose of life becomes utterly different. Life itself is transformed to become the first step into an eternal life with God.

Early believers who saw the risen Jesus felt compelled to tell the story and help others encounter Jesus for themselves. They spread out from village to village toward the sea, toward Damascus, toward the desert and toward the Sinai and Egypt.

Scholars suggest that the Easter appearance stories were so compelling and vivid that the faith grew in leaps and bounds. It went ‘viral’ as we would say today.

In that ‘going out’ a man in Damascus, named Ananias, had his own experience of Jesus and became a disciple. And then, in Saul’s experience on the road to Damascus, Saul saw Jesus and the Easter Effect happened to him as well. Surely, without this experience of the risen Jesus, Saul would not have become a faithful evangelist for Jesus. At heart this story is not about Saul. It is about God using the experience of seeing the risen Jesus to transform hearers of Jesus’ story. They become active believers who could not wait to tell others.

Story as Sending-Story

This time as I read Acts chapter 9, I was particularly aware of the second human actor in the drama. Ananias hears his name called in a vision. He immediately responds, “Here I am, Lord.” By answering quickly and knowing who is calling him, Ananias shows he is a disciple.

Ananias is immediately sent to find Saul. God told Ananias that Saul has had a vision of Ananias coming and restoring his sight. Ananias wants no part of it and worries about how evil Saul is and how much harm he has done and wants to do. God responds, “Go, for Saul is an instrument I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel.”

I am amazed and impressed with Ananias’ willingness to go where God sent him. The Easter Effect gave Ananias the sense of urgency and courage to believe God was sending him into danger for good reason.

I believe, in the end, this story is a sending story. In it we are to see the effect Jesus had and has

on people and we are to become such people ourselves. We are Easter people. We are a people who believe in the Risen Jesus.

As I look back on my life I am amazed at the effect the Easter Resurrection Story has had on my life. I have been sent because Jesus is risen. I am sent all the way here to Church of the Palms. (I actually had to look up on the map where Sarasota was.) You too have been and are being sent. I want to ask you, “Where has God sent you because of Easter?” Where and to whom and with whom and for what purpose have you been sent because you believe in the risen Jesus? Where does God send us, Church of the Palms, because we are made up of Easter people?

Now, our friend, Ralph, came to learn what he did not know. When he got home his third-grade school teacher daughter, Molly, invited him to come and show his videos and teach her class about India. Ralph worked hard to get correct information about what he had really seen.

Initially happy with his own ignorance, Ralph studied until what he shared was the real deal. And, in the process, Ralph’s story quit being about himself. The story quit being about how strange or crazy India seemed. It quit being about how the U.S. was better in every regard. The story became, to the best of Ralph’s ability, a glimpse of the real India – good and bad.

The Easter Effect for Ananias in today’s lesson, Acts chapter 9, is that God sent him to a dangerous place. When God sends us, he equips us to do the things that are scariest to us.

God never gives up in calling us. So, it is best to quickly say, like Ananias, “Lord, here I am, send me.”

Prayer

Thank you, O Lord, for these stories of the resurrection Easter appearances. Thank you also for transformed people who were compelled by the Easter Effect to transform the world and transform our lives. Use us now as your instrument of transforming this world into a place of your peace, love and justice. We ask this in the name of the Risen Savior, Amen.

Notes:

[1] This quote is from Daniel Boorstin, former Librarian of Congress, in his book *The Discoverers*.

[2] See the work of Thomas Kuhn in his book *The Scientific Revolution*.



The Easter Effect

Dr. Hmingi Browne

April 15, 2018

