

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush**  
**April 4, 2010, Easter Sunday**  
**Luke 24:36-43**  
**Wondering Joy**

Ask anyone what they remember from Sunday School and they will likely talk about learning bible stories: Moses parting the Red Sea; Daniel in the lion's den; Jesus feeding the 5,000, or telling the paralyzed man, "Take up your bed and walk." The teachers didn't attempt to explain how these things happened – they just happened, by the power of God, through a wonder of heaven, by a miracle plain and simple. We learned the stories; sometimes we even acted them out. Although in doing so it soon became clear that you can't reenact the miraculous. That's why in the Christmas play, the star that guided Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem didn't move through the heavens on its own, but was carried on a pole by an older youth. Or in Easter pageants, angels weren't available on cue to roll away the stone, so two stagehands quietly did the work of heaven. Yet all these accommodations didn't diminish the drama; something wonderful was still re-presented amidst the crooked halos, flubbed lines, and all.

The story is told about a church's Easter cantata whose climactic scene was Christ's ascension, in which the actor playing Jesus was slowly hoisted out of view through an opening in the ceiling. "Lo, I am with you always," he said, signaling for the ascension to begin. "Even unto the end of the world." The flight upward was quite dramatic until the stage crew briefly lost grip of the rope and the actor nearly dropped back to the stage. With his feet dangling inches from the floor and bewildered disciples looking on in horror, the actor kept his composure and said, "Oh, and one more thing; love one another." Immediately, the rope yanked him up into the ceiling and out of sight.

Moses and the burning bush; Lazarus being called forth from the tomb. These are the stories of our faith, which some are prone to dismiss as just that, mere stories. Skeptics argue that the church talks about spiritual stuff but not "real stuff" or factual things. They are amazed that so many people keep coming on Easter morning to hear about the resurrection, which, in their skeptical view, is just a lovely story – nothing more.

So for a moment, take away this church setting and imagine you are having a grown-up, serious conversation at a dinner party. Let's say the topic is "education." As you sip your Chardonnay, you discuss public schools in America. You talk factually about class sizes, teachers' salaries, and how high property taxes are. To anyone eavesdropping, it sounds like a knowledgeable, serious conversation. But if you really want to talk about education, you need to talk about a lot more: about the long hours spent in classrooms; the bus rides, and hallway bullies; the thousand daily details around homework, lunchboxes, permission slips and remembering to cover your mouth when you sneeze; about teachers buying supplies with their own money and taking home work every day; about children carrying heavy backpacks full of books but also souls burdened with heavy issues from home, such as abuse, divorce, money problems and all types of

difficulties. Any real talk about education involves much more than ABCs and yellow school buses.

Or consider another adult gathering where you are stirring a cup of coffee and the conversation shifts to the topic of “hunger.” As a rational, caring adult, you mention how terrible it is that people go hungry and that there is still a need for food pantries and soup kitchens. We think government should be doing more for people in need and yet we worry about how it will all be paid for, given our growing national debt; so perhaps people shouldn’t be so dependent on handouts, as we shake our heads in disapproval before heading to the buffet table. But hunger is so much more than all that. It is a silent reality for millions in America, who are too embarrassed to admit the gnawing pain in their empty stomachs, the children crying at home who don’t understand there’s nothing in the house to eat; the elderly, depressed and alone, with no will to fix a meal in an empty house. Hunger relates to not having grocery stores in our neighborhoods so people live on fast food and junk that literally shortens life spans. Hunger means being mindful of the amount of food thrown away this weekend. It is not uncommon for as much as 15% of all the food we buy to be thrown away untouched. That adds up to about \$600 a year in waste, not to mention all the food we leave on our plates or wash down the disposal. Only from this deeper perspective can a conversation really start to address the topic of hunger in America.

Now return to our church setting and let’s talk about the faith story we call “Easter.” On the first day of the week, at early dawn, a group of women went to the cemetery to visit the place where the crucified Jesus was entombed. They found the stone rolled away, but the body was miraculously gone. Skeptics and agnostics scoff at this story, claiming we accept all this on faith without proof or scientific data; and they don’t have time for such superficialities, as they rush off to prepare for their next dinner party conversation on politics or education or some other topic.

But no one in the Easter story treated the events of that morning superficially. When the women found the tomb was empty, they were upset and deeply perplexed. When they ran back to tell the others what they’d seen and been told, the men thought they were lying and telling them an “idle tale.” Peter then runs to the cemetery and does his own CSI investigation – visiting the possible crime scene, looking for evidence of grave robbers, examining the discarded burial cloths, and then returning back to the others perplexed yet also amazed.

The same thing happened when Jesus appeared in the Upper Room. The disciples’ skeptical minds told them they were seeing a ghost. So Jesus directly addressed their fears and doubts. He said, “Look at me. See my hands and feet. Touch me. A ghost doesn’t have flesh and bones as I do.” Then in verse 41 comes a great phrase: “In their joy they were disbelieving and wondering.” Juxtaposed together are two complex emotions – joy, deep excitement and gut-level happiness, plus the honest, brain-rattling feelings of disbelief and wonder. Jesus saw their disbelieving, wondering joy, so he went even deeper with them. He asked for something to eat and ate in their presence, as if to add further proof that the one who was dead is now alive – and hungry to boot!

What's going here? Paul Tillich was a great theologian but admittedly he was prone to use a 50 cent word when a nickel phrase would have been just as good. He said this: "The relation between God and the world is one of participation – and participation is a relation whose intimacy and depth exceeds causality."<sup>1</sup> The fundamental relation between God and the world is one of participation, but a special kind of participation. It is not simply an involvement through cause and effect – God causes the sun to rise and then disappears as we walk in the light or stumble in the shadows. No, God is involved at all levels of life – intimately, deeply. God in Christ saw the group huddled in the Upper Room, including followers of Jesus frightened for their lives lest they also be crucified, and women disciples kept on the margins of a male-dominated world but to whom the angels entrusted the greatest story ever told. Christ came to them, and in their wondering joy he talked with them, told them to touch him, asked them for food, and despite having died, now fully re-engaged with them in their daily life.

This re-engagement didn't stop with the early disciples. It has continued ever since and includes us. God in Christ through the Spirit participates intimately, deeply in our world – a world where children sit in classrooms and teachers teach, where choices are made about how we grow our crops and provide the fruits of the earth to one another, sometimes generously; sadly, sometimes wastefully and unjustly. God in Christ through the Spirit participates intimately, deeply in our world of politics and law, our world of war and peace, our world of loving relationships as well as places of sin and broken promises that destroy too many relationships; in our world that can never be fully understood through tidy facts and statistics, because it is far too complicated, far too rich, wonderful, and spiritually deep for such superficial, rational discourse.

If the truth be told, it is skepticism and doubt that are superficial, while faith involves real depth and intellectual challenge. It is the unwillingness to engage, to risk, to embrace the full complexity of life that causes some people to run from faith, shouting back over their shoulder that it's just a bunch of stories about impossible miracles. By contrast, it is a desire to connect, to love even when it's risky, to immerse ourselves in the fullness of life that causes us to fall to our knees, to open our arms, to set the table so all may eat, and to tell this Easter story so that all may discover a mystery that flows all around us and through us.

God loves us so much that God refuses to leave us alone. Sometimes this love causes me to tremble, as we said on Good Friday, standing beneath the cross of Jesus. Sometimes this love causes me to doubt and wonder, as we say on Easter morning, standing before the empty tomb of Christ. Always it fills me with joy, for this deep, intimate, stubborn love that is stronger than death has been revealed in our midst once and for all time. So now, in a request that is far from being superficial, Christ invites you to join him for something to eat. On this day of all days, open your eyes – open your hearts – and join the risen Christ at his resurrection meal. Alleluia!

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> John Thatamanil, "Tillich and the Postmodern" in *The Cambridge Companion to Paul Tillich*, ed. Russell Re Manning, 2009, p. 299.