

EASTER SUNDAY

April 21, 2019

“The Two Trees and An Empty Tomb”

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Scripture: Genesis 3:21-24; Revelation 21:1-5, 22:1-5; John 20:1-18;
I Corinthians 15:51-52; Romans 6:3-5

I. The Tree of Life

The Bible begins with a tree, and ends with a tree. In fact, it begins and ends with the *same* tree: The Tree of Life. Of course, the Tree of Life isn't the only tree that appears in the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis there is also the infamous Tree of Knowledge. You know, the one that caused all the trouble for Adam and Eve when they ignored God's command and ate its fruit. But outside of this story, the Tree of Knowledge is never mentioned again.

Incidentally, Islam's sacred book, the Qur'an, makes no mention whatsoever of the Tree of Knowledge being in the Garden. Only the Tree of Life was there, which the Qur'an calls the Tree of Immortality. In Jewish mysticism, the Tree of Life is the preeminent symbol of the Kabbalah, from which the ten powers of the divine realm branch out. So Christianity isn't the only one of the Abrahamic faiths to recognize the Tree of Life as a powerful spiritual metaphor. It's just that our scriptures begin and end with this mysterious Tree.

When we flip to the end of our Bible, the Book of Revelation, we find that the Tree of Life is no longer standing in the Garden of Eden, but is straddling the River of Life in the center of the New Jerusalem where God's people will all dwell in peace. The Tree is said to produce twelve kinds of fruit. Can you imagine how wonderful Tree of Life fruit pie might taste? The leaves are good to eat, too, apparently. Revelation says they are “for healing of nations.”

The fact that people are eating *anything* from the Tree of Life is quite a surprise for those of us who remember the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. After all, God is said to have expelled the couple from the Garden and set angels with flaming swords at its gates specifically to prevent them – or any of their descendants (including us) – from entering the Garden and eating its fruit.

So why is it that you can bake Tree of Life fruit pies at the end of our Bible but can't so much as get within a hundred yards of the Tree without being cut down by a flaming sword at the beginning?

Before moving to that question, there is an important point to be made about the Genesis story of the Tree. Many people believe that when Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, God punished the couple by expelling them from the Garden and preventing their way back. This couldn't be further from the truth. God was *protecting* them.

Think about it. God states the reason for expelling the couple this way:

“See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever”— therefore

the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. (Genesis 3:22-23)

Now, we all know how well it went for this mythological couple after they became aware of good and evil. Before they had even left the garden they had become ashamed of their bodies, they were hiding from God, and they were bickering and blaming each other for what had happened. In other words, they were already getting a taste of what life outside the Garden would be like, on down to our present day.

That's the purpose of these mythological stories. Their purpose isn't so much to tell us about events said to have happened thousands of years ago, but to tell us about our lives today. They speak about things that are true always, not just "way back when." So, if you want to know what the author of this story was trying to tell his audience thousands of years ago, all you really need to do is ask how it resonates today. Let's try it, and I'll bet you'll see why God's expelling the couple from the Garden is a protection, not a punishment.

Imagine if a giant piece of that Tree-of-Life pie were to suddenly come down from Heaven and God said, "Dessert is served!" None of us who ate that pie would ever die. No more need for that columbarium we just dedicated yesterday! At first glance, living forever here on earth might sound wonderful. But take another glance.

Perhaps it would be wonderful if *you* lived here forever, but consider your neighbors. You know, the ones who never mow their front lawn and play AC/DC music until well past midnight? How about all those political leaders we know and love? Would we want each and every one of them to live forever? How about the Taliban, or the Ku Klux Klan, or the Neo-Nazis? Would you want to live in a world where these and many others were here to stay, for always?

Frankly, I don't know that I could even put up with *myself* forever, let alone these folks. Not unless I was fundamentally changed.

There's the problem. In the history of humanity, not much changes. We make little strides here and there, but do you really believe that we'll ever reach a point where everyone is holding hands and singing Kumbaya around the campfire?

No, without some kind of fundamental transformation in which each and every person gained the spiritual stature and maturity of Jesus himself, eternal life in this realm would not be heaven, but hell.

This is precisely why the story says God expelled the mythological couple from the Garden before they could get their grubby little hands on the Tree of Life. Because they would "eat, and live forever."

Expelling the couple meant that the couple would eventually die, and their sin with them. In other words, in response to human sin, God created a condition where literally nothing we do while we live in this realm has eternal consequences. Our actions do have consequences, but they don't last forever. Everyone dies, no matter who they are, what they have done, and what they have left undone. When they die, their sin dies with them.

“Now wait,” you say. “What about that other Christian message? The one taught in many churches that says our actions and decisions here on earth very much determine what happens with us for eternity? If we claim Jesus as Lord, God gives us a ‘Get out of hell free’ card. The one that says if we don’t believe in Jesus or act in a certain way to please his God, then we take the ‘Down’ elevator after death.”

This may be the message of many churches today, but it is not the Christian message. At least it is not the message of the earliest Christians. For these Christians, there was another Tree they looked to in the story of God and us. A Tree that had been cut down, fashioned into a Roman instrument of death ... and stood near an Empty Tomb. The presence of this Tree, and this Tomb, revealed the true story about God and us.

II. The Tree of Love

In the account of Christ’s resurrection in the Gospel of John, the first person to see Jesus is Mary Magdalene, who confuses him for a gardener! Many people wonder why such a close friend and disciple of Jesus would not recognize Jesus immediately. Is Jesus, or the Gospel writer, sending a message of some sort? If so, one might expect Jesus to appear as a king, or a priest, or a mighty spiritual warrior – not a gardener.

Why a gardener? Well, a gardener needs a garden and we’ve just been talking about the most famous garden in the Bible: The Garden of Eden. We’ve also been talking about a famous gardener: Adam, who was placed in the garden “to till and keep it.” (Genesis 2:15) Could this curiosity of Christ appearing as a gardener to Mary Magdalene be revealing more than it seems? Namely, is there a connection being made here between Adam and Jesus? The apostle Paul certainly thought so. So did the early Church.

Writes Paul, “For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many ... just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:15, 18-19)

Many people don’t realize that the earliest Christians believed the resurrection signaled that salvation has come to *all* of humanity, not just certain humans. Yet here, Paul clearly spells it out. The First Adam created the condition in which sin led to death. Remember: death is God’s protection mechanism that ensures that we don’t live for eternity in a state of sin. But the risen Christ is the Second Adam. Easter reveals that, when we die in our sin, we don’t stay dead. We live!

Only, before we get too excited about living forever, we must remember that living forever is only a good thing if there is no more sin – that is, if we’re all transformed into people who are, in essence, Christ-like.

This is exactly what Paul believes will happen to us. Were you paying attention to our reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians?

*"Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but **we will all be changed**, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and **we will be changed**." (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)*

What part of "all" do these fire-and-brimstone-preaching Christians not understand? Just as Adam does not just stand for one man but stands for all of humanity in our past and present condition, so Christ, as Second Adam, stands for all of humanity – only he stands for humanity in our *future* condition. In other words, the Resurrected Christ shows us where we are all headed. Eventually we will not simply have faith IN Christ, but have the faith OF Christ. Literally, we will all be Christ-like.

This destiny is imagined quite vividly in the Book of Revelation where the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven and all of God's people now live in it. At the center of this great city, straddling the River of Life is the Tree of Life – the very tree people were forbidden to eat from in the Garden of Eden. Only now, people are feely eating of its fruit and even its leaves. In other words, every single person who dwells in the New Jerusalem has been transformed into a New Creation. The only people not there are those who refuse the transformation – and even then, God isn't punishing them by keeping them outside, but protecting them from turning their eternity into a living hell. Eventually, they'll get there too, but John says it will take a second death for them. Either way, we all make it there in the end.

This is the meaning of Easter. Being raised from the dead, Jesus, the Son of Man, has made the transformation ahead of us, becoming the Christ, the Son of God and Second Adam.

One final note here. So far, aside from a brief mention of Mary Magdalene and Eve, our focus has been almost entirely on males: Adam and Jesus, the Son of Man and the Son of God. What about the females?

If Jesus is the Second Adam, might there be a Second Eve?

Hold a mirror up to yourself. You'll be looking at who the Bible believes is destined to become the Second Eve. It is you. It is me. It is all of us together. God's Grace has changed our destiny from eternal separation from God to eternal union with God. Why do you think Jesus is always talking about wedding feasts, and telling parables about bridegrooms and bridesmaids? And why do you think Revelation talks about a wedding between the New Jerusalem and the Lamb of God? It's just a change of metaphor. Revelation is still talking about Christ and us. Married. For eternity.

Easter Sunday, therefore, is not only a celebration of Christ's resurrection, but the celebration of a marriage proposal between the Son of God (Christ, the Second Adam) and the Daughter of God (humanity transformed into the Second Eve). Perhaps instead of Easter eggs we should be eating wedding cake!