



**“True Story”**

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Hayward, California***

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Luke 24:1–12 (NRSV)***

My mother earned a two-year teaching certificate in elementary education back in the days when Dwight D. Eisenhower was President and our nation was so desperate for teachers to educate the Baby Boom generation that one could attend college and take courses in elementary education for two years, get a temporary teaching certificate for five years, and then go back to college for another two years and finish with a college diploma and a teaching certificate—at least that’s how it worked in Iowa in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Before my parents were married, my mother was for two years a second grade teacher who held a temporary teaching certificate. After my father died years later, she reentered the workforce as a preschool teacher.

One of the benefits of having had a mother who was an elementary school teacher was the attention that she gave to school readiness—particularly reading readiness—for my sister and me. There were some things that we went without as children, but we never lacked for parental interest in our education.

From as far back as I can remember, until we became readers ourselves, our mother (and sometimes our dad) read stories to us almost every night as we were falling asleep. One or the other of our parents stood at the threshold of our bedroom with the bedroom lights off, and the hall light on, and read to us. It was too dark to see the expression on either one’s face. We could only see outline of their shapes, like giant silhouettes, and hear their voices until we drifted off to sleep.

When we were very young, my parents read to us Mother Goose nursery rhymes, Aesop’s Fables, and Little Golden Books. As we got older, their reading list included the original versions of the Honey Bunch and Heidi series. Later they read to us most of the Nancy Drew and Hardy Boys Mysteries.

Quite often at the end of each book, or at the end of a chapter, I would ask, “Mom, Dad, is it true? Is the story true?”

I don't recall the exact responses that either of them offered to my questions, but I just remember that my questions seemed to give them pause.

## II

Whether we are five, twenty-five, fifty, or one-hundred five years old, I suspect that we have asked of the Easter story, "Is it true?"

Some of us have learned to hold this question close to our hearts for fear of being deemed a heretic.

Others have stopped asking the question because we have decided once and for all, yes or no, it is true, or it isn't true.

Regardless of *where* we situate ourselves on the continuum between absolute assurance that the Easter story is true and absolute disbelief in its truth, we are in good company.

Today's account of the Easter message illustrates that even the disciples, who were the first followers of Jesus and his earthly companions, showed up at different places on what I call "the Easter continuum" from absolute assurance to total disbelief.

Luke's gospel explains that the women who went early to the tomb were unsure about what they were seeing and what was the meaning of the empty tomb. Deeper into the story we learn that the men who go inside the tomb, and the Apostle Peter, whom we encounter a bit later, seem totally convinced that Christ has risen from the dead. The other apostles, meanwhile, seem to think that the apostles who were first on the scene—who happened to be women—were merely passing on some wives' tale.

## III

So there is diversity even within Luke's account of the first Easter as to whether and to what degree Jesus' earthly companions found the story to be true.

The diversity of views on the Easter continuum from belief to disbelief doesn't end in the gospel of Luke. A variety of reactions can be found in the other three gospels (Matthew, Mark, and John) and in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, verses 1–12.

Paul doesn't say anything about an empty tomb in **I Corinthians 15**. For him, Easter's truth is all about eye witness accounts of seeing the resurrected Christ.

**Mark**, by contrast, is the earliest written of the four Easter stories found in the gospels, and offers two different endings to the Easter story. The **older and shorter version** is found in chapter 16, verses 1–8, and includes an account of a man (or maybe an angel) in the tomb who explained that Jesus was not there, that he had risen. But there is no mention of his bodily resurrection.

The later and longer version of Mark's Easter story, which continues on from verse 9 to verse 20, describes his appearance to Mary Magdalene, two unnamed disciples who were walking in the country, his commissioning of the disciples, and his accession into heaven.

**Mathew's** gospel differs from the other three gospels and Paul's epistle, in that the story of Easter is situated in the midst of an earthquake, and explains that the stone was rolled away by an angel. The apostles who came to the tomb in Matthew's story were terrified by what they experienced until Jesus appeared to them in the midst of the other followers, and told them to go and tell his brothers in Galilee that they would see him again.

**John**, by comparison, was the last of the four gospels to be written down. John set the Easter story in a garden, and explained that the apostles mistook the resurrected Christ for a cemetery gardener, and feared that someone had stolen their Jesus.

As we read in all four gospels and in Paul's epistle to the Corinthians, we discover that Jesus' post resurrection appearances occur almost always where two or more are gathered. So some biblical and theological scholars have inferred that the resurrected Christ was not some occasional apparition experienced by a few early followers, but rather the people who had heard the gospel message reunited on Easter morning and thereafter to continue Christ's mission—to be the resurrected Christ for others.

So there you have it: one Easter event, with six or more different versions of the story. Are they all true? Is one truer than the other? How do we account for these differences? What, in God's name, do we do with the differences? Do we choose one over the other, and discard the rest? Or do we try to integrate the six or seven and create one narrative out of the whole? (That's what we've done with the Christmas story?) What's to be done? What's to be said?

#### IV

I don't know if you can hold all six or seven variations on the Easter story in your head at once or not. It's nice if you can, but it's no tragedy if you can't. You can always go look them up and compare them for yourself.

What's more important about how the Easter stories, in my view, is that we are simply aware that there *are* in fact six or seven different accounts of the Easter story in the Bible, and that they are all *different* from each other.

Biblical scholars help us understand that these differences are the result of there being at least six different story-telling communities associated with the original story, and numerous other historical and cultural contexts through which these stories have been passed on. Each teller and re-teller has had their own respective personal and cultural

concerns that have influenced how these stories were received by them, and shared with others.

The gospels, remember, were passed on—first through oral tradition for twenty to forty years after Jesus' death before they were first written down—and Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which was written in his lifetime, was copied and recopied and distributed numerous times over the last two thousand years. So the Easter story that we have received in our modern Bibles was filtered through the experiences and witness of multiple tellers living through multiple and diverse generations and cultures.

Each of the tellers', transcribers', and translators' historical and cultural contexts helps account for the differences in the Easter stories that we have received, and each helps account for the different places where the tellers, transcribers, and translators were and are situated on "the Easter belief continuum," from absolute belief to absolute disbelief.

Our own respective spiritual experiences also serve as a filter and a refiner of our beliefs about the Easter story, and how we communicate this story to others. In fact, our Easter beliefs may have as much to do with the stories of our lives as they do with the biblical stories of the resurrection. Our own experiences of delivery from suffering, our own encounters with new life amidst the realities of death, or our own accounts of hope that has healed our grief may have led us to know and trust the Easter story more than any account that we have received through scripture.

## V

Regardless of which story speaks most profoundly to us—either one of the biblical accounts or an account from our own experience—each of these is a true story. Each story that affirms that suffering is not our purpose, that death is not the end, and that there is a hope beyond earthly hope—these stories are all Easter stories. And they are all true. Our charge now is to go and tell others what we have seen and heard. Happy Easter. Amen.