

They Came, They Saw, They Were Ignored

Have I ever mentioned to any of you that I enjoy the game of baseball? It was not always so. I confess to being completely oblivious to the victory of my now-beloved St. Louis Cardinals in the World Series of 1967 when I was not quite seven and their defeat the following year in the championship despite the heroics of Bob Gibson. At the time, I was much too busy following “the world’s game” of football, called soccer here in the U.S., and my favorite side, the Tottenham Hotspurs. But when we moved back to the States in the summer of 1969, settling in New York just in time for the miracle of the Amazing Mets, I was hooked and gladly transferred my allegiance to my hometown team when we moved back to the St. Louis area the following summer. I think that process of coming to enjoy the game under the auspices of a team that was not “my own” enabled me to fall in love with the game in and of itself rather than being a strictly partisan fan.

And so I became a baseball fan, growing up scouring the agate type of the sports page for statistics and box scores and transactions of the most obscure ballplayer. I haven’t had time in years but there was a time when I could easily tell you at least the starting eight and rotation for every team in the big leagues and most of their bench players, too. Name a major league team and I could tell you where all their minor league affiliates were located and who their hottest prospects were. I’ve still got a couple of sizable boxes of baseball cards in the back of my closet and I was part of a far-flung fantasy league for several years, winning one championship. Alas, I was never much good at the actual game – too near-sighted and too uncoordinated and too slow. But that never diminished my enjoyment.

For me, there has always been a lot of truth to the title of the essay and book by Thomas Boswell, Why Time Begins on Opening Day. For the baseball fan, today is like a day of new birth, new beginnings. After the seemingly endless expectation of Spring Training (and this year’s was especially long, thanks to the World Baseball Classic), Opening Day is when the games finally really count. All thirty teams in Major League Baseball start off even with all possibilities wide open for the newly assembled nines in their clean uniforms, clean ballparks, and clean, white baseballs. Hope is in the air. Even in cities where there is little logical reason to be hopeful (Houston and Miami come to mind this year and the Cubs always fall into this category), there is still the possibility that this year could be a repeat of 1969, when a team of perpetual underdogs catches baseball lightning in a bottle. Even if there is little hope of a championship, perhaps this will be the year that the underachieving pitcher finally works it out or that the injured veteran has one last burst of glory or that the unheralded rookie bursts onto the scene. Maybe this year, the seemingly never-ending rebuilding process will finally show fruit. After the long, cold, dreary winter, there is the promise of spring and new life. For baseball fans, time begins on opening day.

But we are here this morning to celebrate an “opening day” of another and greater sort. For in this auspicious Year of the Lord Two Thousand and Thirteen, baseball’s opening day coincides with Easter, the celebration of the day that Jesus’ tomb was found to be open and his body gone. Over the course of that opening day, some of his friends came to realize that this mysterious event heralded an even greater truth – that Jesus had been raised from the dead by our Loving Creator, restored to life in a resurrection that they had not expected though he had predicted it. Over the following days they experienced the reality of his new mode of being – he bore the scars of his experience of defeat but possessed new capabilities as well, passing through locked

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doors and vanishing before their eyes. Hmm... Battle-scared but with new talents... sounds like the Mariners. Unlike what will happen in baseball today, no one ended the ultimate "opening day" with their hopes dampened. Only death was a loser.

As time passed and Jesus' disciples experienced his ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost and miracles and persecutions, they came to a deeper understanding of his opening day. They came to understand and to teach that "opening day" meant the opening of the way of life to all people, Jews and gentiles, slaves and free. They realized that the future was open to them in a way it had never seemed to be before. The Kingdom of God, the rule of God on earth as in heaven, was now begun, inaugurated at least. The opening of the change of reality had begun.

Looking back, not quite two thousand years later, we have a perspective that those early followers of Jesus did not. We know that their hopes for a quick return for Jesus and a final reckoning with the force of death and brokenness in the world are playing out differently than they had expected. We live in the tension between "already" and "not yet." Yes, Christ is risen and we rightly say "Alleluia!" But he has not returned in power and still humankind struggles with the choice between death and life and often chooses poorly. Yes, we are free from death and sin but too many do not recognize or take advantage of their freedom and stay yoked to addictions, hatreds, and spiritual darkness. Yes, Jesus is Lord but Empire still claims its adherents and refuses to give up the stage.

I could not help but think about that tension between "already" and "not yet" when I read Luke's account of that "opening day" long ago. It begins with a reminder that it is part of a longer, more complicated story: "But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came..." "They?" Who are "they?" For the answer, we move back across the chapter division inserted by Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury, some 1100 years after Luke wrote his gospel. In chapter 23, starting in verse 50, we read of how Joseph of Arimathea gained Pilate's permission to remove the dead body of Jesus from the cross and take it for burial in a new tomb he owned. Verse 55 reads, "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid." These are the women of whom we read in our passage for this morning, the ones who came and saw the tomb open and the body gone and heard the message from the mysterious, shining beings and went to give the good news to Peter and the rest. But who were they? Where did they come from?

If we follow their trail backwards through the Gospel according to Luke, we find the answer to this question in the early verses of chapter eight. Relatively early in Jesus' ministry, Luke tells us, "he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources." These, then, are the women who had come with him from Galilee, faithful disciples almost as long as the Twelve. It was they who had kept Jesus and his itinerant band alive, apparently, using their resources to pay for food and possibly shelter. And it was they who stayed near Jesus until the end, when, as Matthew and Mark testify, the men who followed had all deserted him at his arrest.

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Their reward from their male counterparts for this faithfulness was to be dismissed out of hand when they came to the male disciples with their startling news of the open tomb. "...returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest... But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them." Can't you just hear them? "Now, ladies, there's no need to get excited. We're all tired, we've all been through something terrible, but you have to calm down. We all wish Jesus was alive but you know it just isn't so. Why don't you go in the kitchen and make us all some coffee and sandwiches... Those gals sure do get wound up, don't they? Now, let's us men figure out what to do next."

I've always thought that Jesus showed a real sense of humor as well as a deep understanding of people when he nicknamed Simon the fisherman "Peter," the rock. Sometimes Peter was rock-solid. Sometimes, he was rock-headed. On that "Opening Day," just maybe, he was a rock. I don't know if he felt guilty for dismissing the women after they'd shared so much together. Maybe, since we know he was a married man, he'd actually learned that women are to be heeded, at least once in a while. Maybe, after his predicted denial of Jesus, he was just desperate to have his teacher alive again so that Jesus would forgive him. But whatever his motivation, Peter valued the story of the women enough to go and see.

We live in the "already" and the "not yet." Christ is risen but a good portion of the world still behaves as if nothing has changed, as if selfishness and death still reign on the earth. I could not read this story this morning and not think of all the news stories I've read in the last couple of weeks that show how men are still dismissing women as not being worth listening to, as not being worth seeing as anything but objects for men's appetites rather than as our sisters in the Lord and our equals as half of humankind. I was horrified by not one but two stories from India in recent weeks of men gathering in gangs to rape and torture women. I would have gladly dismissed those stories as the darkness evident in a backward and unenlightened country but they were quickly followed by the furor over the rape of a high school girl in the apple-pie American town of Steubenville, Ohio, and by the apparent dismissal of her plight by the news media who spoke in sorrowful tones of the loss of promising football careers to two of her rapists. Here indeed was the dark side of America's thirst for spectator sports. It made me ashamed to be a sports fan of any kind.

Just days later, I read of the less well publicized case of Adria Richards. A respected software developer, she was attending a conference in Santa Clara when two men seated behind her began to make sexually oriented jokes about the presentation they were watching. Fed up after several minutes of this, Richards turned around in her seat and used her phone to take a picture of the two men and send it to conference organizers by Twitter along with their GPS position in the hall, asking "Can someone talk to these guys about their conduct?" The men were escorted from the conference and, after Richards blogged about her experience, one was fired over the incident. But so was Adria Richards. Her company fired her for publicly humiliating the men, apparently considering her own initial humiliation as "an idle tale." To make matters worse, Richards has since received a number of disturbing tweets about the incident. According to the San Jose Mercury News, some "referenced a photo that had been posted of a bloodied and beheaded woman that implied Richards could be raped and murdered. Still others called Richards dumb, said "I hate you" and hoped that she would kill herself."

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Elsewhere in the news was a ruling from a judge in Iowa allowing a dentist to fire a high-performing assistant because he found her “irresistible” and feared he would eventually have an affair with her. This despite a solid ten-year working relationship which had never featured any flirting or inappropriate behavior and the younger woman’s testimony that she had always thought of her boss as a “father figure.” And then there’s Victoria’s Secret, which this week announced a new line of underwear featuring suggestive messages. The new products’ targeted buyers: preteen girls.

How long, O Lord, how long? How long will we, the followers of Jesus, stand by and say nothing while the world behaves as if all women can do is generate “idle tales?” How long will we stay silent while some of your followers, in your name, deny to women their right to exercise the gifts you give them to preach and to minister and to lead? How long before men stop clinging to the power that centuries of patriarchy have gained them and recognize that this was never part of your plan?

In response to the Steubenville case, a blogger named Ann Voskamp wrote an open letter to her four sons that’s been heavily quoted on-line in the past few weeks. I want to read part of it to you because I think she expresses well the perspective we find in the Gospels:

“...this is what your dad and I want you to get, to get this and never forget it: that when God decided to pull on skin and make His visitation into the world, He didn’t show up in some backroom of an inner boy’s club or regale us with some black tie inaugural affair.

This is what God chose as best, this is where He first became one of us: God chose to make His entry point into the world through the holy space of a woman, to enfold Himself inside of a woman, to drink of a woman, be held and nourished and cared for by a woman — that’s the jolting truth of how God loves His daughters with His honor.

That Christ never beat down a woman with harsh words or lusting eyes or sneering innuendos, but He stepped in and stopped a broken woman from the abuse of angry men. Christ came to the defense of a hurting woman and the Son of Man stood between her ache and her attackers and He lifted the weight of shame from her and cupped her heart with hope and wrote a new future into the dust and dirt of everything and he saved. her. life. That’s how God loves His daughters with His defense.

That Christ didn’t degrade women in His talk, but He made women heroes in His stories. He invited a woman with a coin and broom to reveal the truth about the Kingdom of God. He honored an intentional woman with an unjust judge as unveiling the character of God. He elevated a lonely, unmarried woman who dropped her meager resources into the temple treasury as the rebuke of God for all the rich and religious. That’s how God loves His daughters with His words.

That Christ didn’t demonize women but He accepted the presence of a woman reviled by the self-righteous, He sat with the scandalous woman the righteous regarded as damaged goods, He welcomed the rejected and the immodest though he lost the respect of the religious. That’s how God loves His daughter with His grace.

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That when Christ stepped out of that black tomb, he still didn't choose to first manifest Himself to prestigious officials, religious leaders, the Twelve, but instead He revealed Himself first to the women, He entrusted the veracity of His resurrection to the testimony of the women, He offered the privilege of proclaiming Christ as the risen Savior to the women, though no court at the time would accept their testimony. That's how God loves His daughters with His regard."

My brothers and my sisters, today is Opening Day. Hope is everywhere. But for us, the followers of Jesus, every day is opening day, every morning is Easter morning, every day we arise and go out, clothed and in our right minds by the grace of God, is a day that we can start anew for God's mercies are fresh every morning. We look back to Easter and fill our hearts with hope and courage but then we must look around us and apply that hope and courage to speaking love and truth into our world because we live in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" – Christ is risen indeed but still too many walk in darkness. Death has been vanquished, victory won, our Lord has conquered the grave – but still so many live in fear which brings selfishness and callousness and cruelty. It is up to us on this opening day to proclaim the tomb of Christ open and empty, to spread the word that life is available to all, to live our lives showing forth the hope that makes our lives a joy. On this Easter day, we must carry the news that God is in our land, on the loose! And that God in Christ desires life for all men and all women and for all creation. We serve a risen savior! Let us sing eternal alleluias to Jesus, the King! Christ is risen! Alleluia! He is risen indeed! Alleluia, Alleluia!