

HE CALLED THE SHOT

I.) HE CALLED THE SHOT

So, it's Easter. What do we celebrate? Eternal life? No. We celebrate the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Hey, maybe there is a connection. True. And of course you get to celebrate whatever you wish, according to what is most meaningful to you. Otherwise, it will not be a true celebration for you, or from you. But while you are waking up and gathering yourself together for the real celebration, let me tell you about the difference between celebrating eternal life and celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus, whom we call the Christ.

Eternal life is one of the oldest and most universal beliefs of human life on earth. Hindus, Taoists, Buddhists, Greeks, and Jews have all believed – and for many centuries before Jesus came – that there is life beyond the grave. The problem of life, as Hinduism and Buddhism see it, is not death; it is the fact that the soul keeps returning to this earth in endless cycles of rebirth until it develops to such a degree of spiritual perfection that it can pull loose from the wheel (the cycle) and flee into the bliss of nirvana. In Hinduism and Buddhism, Hell is *having* to live life after life on this earth. So if you tell a Hindu that it's Easter, that you're celebrating because Jesus rose from the dead, and that this is why you believe in eternal life ... well, you would get this polite, if pitying, pea-green (NSS) look. They are glad you are finally learning to tie your shoelaces.

On normal days, we understand the broader perspective. I do not need, do I, to belabor you with the burial rites of ancient civilizations all over the globe, stretching into thousands of years B.C.? Many of you have been fascinated by beliefs and symbols of Native Americans, Aztecs, Greeks, Babylonians. Any day of the year except on Easter Sunday morning, you know that the whole world has *always* believed in eternal life. Enoch (Genesis 5:18-24) was the father of Methuselah – that means he came before Noah and the flood. Enoch walked with God and “God took him.” That means he was translated straight into Heaven without having to pass through death, as was Elijah a few thousand years later, in only 850 B.C. Do you know what “B.C.” means? Are you going to impress Jewish people with notions of eternal life derived from the Resurrection of Jesus? More pea-green looks.

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The Crown Prince Khaemwaset was disturbed because the great pyramids and vast necropolises (cities of the dead) at Giza were so ravished and weather-worn. He and the people were awe-inspired to visit Giza – to gaze on the pyramids that had been built so long before them; to imagine the kings and the people who had walked the land, made love, worked, and dreamed thirteen centuries before them, back in the very mists of time. It was inspiring and humbling to think of their faith, and to realize one’s own fleeting moment in the sands of time. Khaemwaset, with his father’s permission, undertook the great project of repairing and restoring the pyramids and tombs of ancient Giza. Therefore, he is often called the first Egyptologist and archaeologist. Khaemwaset was the fourth son of Ramses II, the Pharaoh we think was contemporary with Moses (1290-1224 B.C.). The pyramids at Giza were being built twelve hundred years before Ramses II (2575-2134 B.C.). The pyramids of Giza (ninety of them) were all built before Abraham became the first Jew on earth. And now we are going to “wow” the world with the fact that we suddenly believe in eternal life?

How often we have been fed the strange picture of a dynamic and vibrant Christian Faith spreading into Turkey and Greece and Italy, carrying with it the incredible message of eternal life to a people lost in darkness and despair, a people without hope, a people with no notion of life after death, a people who thought the grave was the end. Where would the early Christians have found such people? Do we think the followers of Socrates did not believe in eternal life? They *assumed* it! We (meaning our Christian forebears) came proclaiming the Resurrection of Jesus, whom we said was the Christ. Rather quickly, we ran into the Mystery Cults, especially Mithraism and the cult of Osiris. They already had dramatic rituals celebrating resurrection and eternal life. The Christian Faith *was* dynamic and vibrant and it swept through the Roman Empire like wildfire, going from a few persecuted house-churches to the unchallenged state religion of the Empire in a little over two hundred years. But the message of eternal life was not its dynamism. That would not have carried it three yards past the Jerusalem gates. Eternal life is one of the oldest and most universal beliefs on the face of the earth.

So it’s Easter. What do we celebrate? Eternal life? No! The Resurrection of Jesus! The disciples and friends of Jesus already believed in eternal life. They did before they knew Him, and they did after they knew Him. Because they loved Jesus and believed in what He taught and stood for, they would have assumed that He went to Heaven after death. They were not celebrating eternal life. They were not celebrating the fact

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that Jesus got to be with God in Heaven. I mean, that is extremely important, but that is what they would have believed anyway, just as they already believed and assumed that Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Enoch, and countless others were already in Heaven with God.

The celebration is not that Jesus is alive and well in Heaven. The celebration is that Jesus is alive and present WITH US – here on earth. He was with them, and He is with us – right here, right now. *That* is Easter! He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] Not there. Here! He is risen to be with us ... NOW!

“On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.’ And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’” (John 20:19-22) THAT IS WHAT THEY WERE CELEBRATING. IS THAT WHAT WE ARE CELEBRATING?

The early disciples loved Jesus. They were not worried about His credentials. They were not worried about His future. They were not terribly surprised – however saddened – that the world had turned out to be a sorry and cruel place, once again. But they were astounded, astonished, blown away, and ecstatic to discover that they got to go right on being with Him. He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] And He was there with them after all, in spite of everything. And that was going to remain the reality. He would go on being with them here, until they left here to be with Him in the realms beyond. THEY WERE NOT CELEBRATING ETERNAL LIFE. THEY WERE CELEBRATING JESUS’ RESURRECTION. New LIFE in and with Christ Jesus – now.

How do you know I don’t have this all out of focus? Well, you heard the reading from the Gospel of John. Is that not the same focus? Even though it is Easter morning, our first Scripture passage cuts in on Jesus talking to the disciples at the Last Supper. He is preparing them for what is to come. He chides them for their grief at being told He is going away. And He says: “It is in your interest that I am leaving you. If I do not go, *the Advocate* will not come.”

[THE ADVOCATE: What’s Jesus talking about? Do you know anything about an “advocate”? What’s an advocate?]

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He says other things in the same vein: *“When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but will speak only what he hears; and he will make known to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and make it known to you.”*

II.) HE PUT IT IN THE POCKET

Okay. So Jesus called His shot. In real life, like in pool, if you do not call the shot ahead of time, lots of people will think it’s an accident. They will say it doesn’t count. They will say you could never do it again. They will say it is not to be trusted because it was only happenstance.

Likewise, having called the shot, the next question is: Can Jesus *make* the shot? With God’s help, of course. Or maybe it is God making the shot with Jesus helping. (You can quibble over that later, when I don’t have to listen to it.)

Strange words ... brave words ... amazing words – on Thursday evening. But can Jesus come through on it? Now it’s Sunday, four days later – same Gospel of John (meaning same author, same perspective), four chapters later.

You heard the reading. The disciples are huddled together behind locked doors. They are terrified, not knowing if the authorities will be content to stop with killing Jesus, or if the authorities are at this very moment looking for the ringleaders of the movement, to arrest and kill them too. Had the Jewish leaders been either as discerning or as evil as we think, that is exactly what they would have done.

Suddenly, there is Jesus, right there with them. *“Peace be with you!”* What do they need? They are enormously upset, enormously frightened, enormously confused. They do not know what the future holds, what they are supposed to do, where they are to go, what they should do next. *“Peace, friends. Cool down. Take a deep breath. Relax a little. Trust God. Get a grip.”*

Can you imagine this scenario? The feelings that would be flooding through them? Not just the awesome wonder of His being there, but the *relief* of His being there. Never mind the miracle for a minute; I need you – *we* need you! *“Boy are we glad to see you! We’ve been so beside ourselves.”*

So Jesus says it again: *“Peace be with you! It’s okay now. I’m here. You’re going to be fine. Catch your breath. It’s part of the plan.”* And then they react: *“Wow, is it really you? Are you really here?”*

“Yes, of course. Now listen, this is important: As the Father sent me, so I send you. It is only just beginning. My whole life here with you, on the physical level, was just for openers – just to set things up, to get things started. Now the real drama begins. And you have to carry it for me. But I will be with you from now on – with every single one of you, all of the time, everywhere you go. You have to carry it for me, but I will be with you.”

In whatever language, in whatever Gospel, that is the heart and the core of the commission. You have to carry it for me – the true Message of the true God’s love (speak it, share it, declare it, act it out) – but I will be with you.

You remember the thing about the Advocate? *“Then He breathed on them, saying, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit!’”*

Ball in the pocket – right where He said He would put it. From Jesus of Nazareth to Holy Spirit of Jesus the Christ – with each of us always, wherever we go. *That* is Easter! He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] And that does not mean we have eternal life; we already knew that. It means we get to spend our eternal life WITH HIM – starting right here, right now.

(Are you overjoyed? To WHAT, WHERE, and WHOM have you been sent? Really? Are you going where you have been sent?)

III.) SO NOW IT IS TIME TO BELIEVE

So now it is our turn and our time. Time to believe. We all have our struggles with it; Thomas’ story is comforting. But it is our time now. Time to believe. The proclamation is clear: Jesus is here in our midst, as Holy Spirit. If here in physical form, He could only go home with one of us. But today, He goes home with all of us – home, and to school, and to work, and to play ... wherever we go.

Lots of days we do not know He is here. We do not want Him, or we get too busy, or we resent the influence. But He is here and with us as much as we will allow it – as much as we will notice and pay attention – never coercing, never forcing the relationship against our will. But here.

Here with more power, and comfort, and guidance, and love than any of us are willing to receive.

“Be unbelieving no longer, but believe.” Did you hear that part? Did you feel it? As God sent Jesus, so Jesus sends you. None of us have a chance for living life on such a level if the Christ is not with us. It is our turn and our time. And that means our time to believe – to trust The Presence – to know that the Spirit is here and will communicate, and guide, and restore, and love us to the end.

So I have to tell you: The “Second Coming” has already come. It came on Easter and you are in the middle of it. You are already living your eternal life. Your life will not end with your time here on this earth, and your eternal life has already begun. All the energy and hoopla about another Second Coming are foolishness – a red herring. It merely side-tracks you from your duties – from your being sent by Jesus in the here and now. How many thousands of years will it take before we realize that it was a mistake – that Paul and the others made an error, that the New Testament was wrong about this? Either they misunderstood, or they mistook warnings about the destruction of Jerusalem (which occurred around 70 A.D.) for a larger catastrophe. Either way, it is absolutely clear that the entire early church believed that Jesus would return and close out the age within their own lifetimes. Were they right, or were they wrong? (Make yourself say it: “About this, they were wrong.”) At the very least, a little over nineteen hundred years wrong.

The Book of Revelation is fascinating. The message is unique, and in many ways exceedingly revealing and helpful about many issues that we still face. However, in one regard, John’s vision was wrong. It did not happen at all the way he thought it would. The Roman Empire did not end as the Antichrist – Christ converted the Roman Empire. (Was John seeing this more clearly than we think?) Have you noticed yet that the Second Coming did not come to close out the Roman Empire? You mean it didn’t happen like Revelation said it would?! But it’s in the Bible! So ... it’s still going to happen, and they were only wrong about all the details, large and small, for the past nineteen hundred years? When are you going to be honest about your expectations regarding the Second Coming? If you are not, will it not keep messing up your expectations about everything?

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It is Easter, so humor me, okay? You do know how to count? Let's count His Comings:

ONE: Christmas. Jesus is born into our world. That is the First Coming. Then Jesus' physical mission and ministry ended here on Good Friday. We killed Him. He is gone from us.

TWO: Resurrection. Easter. He is back – He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] That is the Second Coming. Right? One – Two.

THREE: If you are a technical purist: Fifty days after Easter, there is Pentecost – the “birthday of the church” – the coming of the Holy Spirit. Some people include Pentecost among the Resurrection Experiences – the Resurrection as the culmination of the Second Coming.

In any case, maybe we should be talking about a Third or Fourth Coming, but first you have to figure out how to get rid of Him. I mean, He cannot come again unless He has gone away again. The whole point of Easter and the Book of Acts is that Jesus is resurrected and with us.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18-20)

Easter IS the Second Coming! Jesus is not coming here again – HE IS ALREADY HERE. Next time, He is not coming – you are going. Hallelujah! Stop waiting around. This is your life. He is with you. Go for it! Rejoice! He is risen!