

Let's Go Deeper...

Wednesday, January 4, 2017

How about an Easter story in these waning days of Christmastide? I'll explain.

Years ago on the day before Easter, one of the members of my Wilmington, NC, church and I were at a park testing the sound system for the next day's Sunrise Service. Since it was such a beautiful afternoon, we had plenty of company. Two women with cameras followed a trio of toddlers, snapping pictures of them as they trailed a pair of ducks around the water's edge. A man with a camera sat perched in front of an azalea in full bloom, angling for the perfect close-up shot of its stunning pink blooms. Not far from us, a woman sat in a lawn chair reading a book while her two school-aged children raced each other back and forth across the bridge. Made curious by our activity, she politely asked us what we were doing.

"We're having an Easter Sunrise Service here tomorrow morning," we told her, "and since it will still be dark at six in the morning, we need to check the sound levels today. This way, we'll be all set."

By this time, the woman's two sons had come back. "They're setting up for a church service," she explained to them. "Tomorrow is Easter and they're going to have a Sunrise Service here."

"Can we come Mama?" asked one of the boys.

Mama was diplomatically non-committal. "We'll see," she said, and with that she picked up her chair, wished us a Happy Easter, and headed off.

In a few moments, we were interrupted again. A man who looked to be in his sixties, his graying hair disheveled by the wind, walked up to where we were working and asked, "What are you doing? Going to have a concert? Having a wedding or something?"

"No," we answered, "we're having an Easter Sunrise Service here tomorrow morning."

With that, the man's voice took on a brusque, defensive tone.

"Well," he huffed, "it's just a belief. And you can believe anything you want, I guess. But that's all it is—just a belief."

"A very strong belief for us, though," my compatriot added, at which time the man harrumphed, turned away, and without saying another word, walked swiftly away.

There you have it. Within the space of five minutes, two different responses to Easter: one cordial, the other antagonistic. From one person, a polite smile. From another, a cynical sneer.

Over forty years ago, while on a youth group trip, a few of us sat up late into the night at a youth hostel engaged in a heated conversation with a man who was a very articulate atheist. For every argument we put forth for the existence of God, he countered with a reasonable-enough argument to the contrary. Back and forth we went on into the wee hours of the morning until I decided to summon



"To one who has faith, no explanation is necessary. To one without faith, no explanation is possible."

Thomas Aquinas

the heavy artillery: I went to get our minister. I was certain he would come down to the lobby, say the very thing needed to melt the hard heart of our opponent, the man would immediately make his confession of faith, and we would go to bed having won one for the Lord.

I was wrong. My pastor, Rev. Jim Cox, didn't say a word to the man. He didn't come down to the lobby at all. In fact, he didn't even get out of bed. All he said was, "David, Thomas Aquinas once said, 'For those who don't believe, no explanation is possible. For those who do believe, no explanation is necessary.'" He said that and then he told me to get some sleep.

I was just about to say something to the man in the park that afternoon long ago when Rev. Cox's words came echoing down through time and stilled my tongue. But the next day, as I looked out at the hundred-and-twenty-some people sitting on folded chairs in the pre-dawn darkness, I couldn't help but to wonder at this thing we call faith. As to why Easter is welcomed by some while scoffed at by others, I have no explanation...still.

Rev. Cox spoke his calming words to me in the summer of 1975.

They came back to me twenty years later in the spring of 1994.

Yesterday, on the third day of 2017, Bob Stauffer called to let me know that Rev. Jim Cox, the pastor of my childhood and youth, the man who baptized me in 1973, was being taken to the Hospice Care facility in Richmond. Knowing my affection and respect for Jim, Bob thought I would want to know.

I certainly did.

I grabbed my sport coat, drove to Richmond, parked my car at the Compassionate Care Center, and was directed to his room where I saw his daughter, Jamie, for the first time in 42 years. She and I were in youth group together at Central Christian when her father was pastor. After a warm embrace, I went to her father's bedside and knelt. Though he was not conscious of my presence, I held Rev. Cox's hand and thanked him for the influence he has had on my life from the years leading up to my baptism through high school youth group.

Jamie asked me if I would pray with her and her extended family—husband, daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter.

I certainly did, giving thanks for my pastor's life and for the new life that shall most certainly be his in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I recognize, of course, that not all believe what I prayed. As the antagonist in North Carolina said that day in the park, "It's just a belief. And you can believe anything you want, I guess. But that's all it is—just a belief."

Well, I choose to believe. No explanation necessary.

My pastor taught me so.

"David," Jamie asked me as I rose to take leave of the room, "When Daddy dies, would you be part of his funeral?"

I certainly will.