



# Facing the Question of Easter

We celebrate with alleluias and amens, but what do we really think about the empty tomb?

**JAMES AMADON**

**T**he sanctuary is spring-scented, filled with soaring anthems and starchy children struggling to sit still. Visitors are welcomed, smiles shared freely, and “Amens” punctuate the rosy sermon. Yet hanging over it all, a question waits patiently but insistently: *Can you believe it?*

The music fades and the benediction sends out the throng, the dinner ends and the fancy dishes are scraped, washed, dried, and put away. The children divide up what’s left of their chocolate eggs as the extended family returns home and the question remains: *Can you believe it?*

Before long, attention turns to the latest news story and summer vacation plans, but the question lingers for those who are still listening: *Can you believe it?*

Can you believe that 2,000 years ago

a man named Jesus, who was also God, was crucified, buried, and raised from the dead as a sign and promise that God was radically remaking the world, fixing all that had gone wrong, and forming a new community and a new reality in which heaven and earth were destined to come together into an eternal, unified whole?

For many the answer is no. The skeptics and nonbelievers in our culture are increasing in number and noise, and they have a point. Comparing the Easter claim with the facts on the ground can make the story literally unbelievable. For some, indefensible religious hypocrisy paraded daily through the headlines and blood-soaked atrocities numbing us with their regularity make the Christian message seem as empty as the tomb. For others, when the tsunami recedes, the bombing stops, the pink slip arrives, or



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burial process. They are distracted by practical matters: Who will roll the stone away? They have accepted the facts and are ready to move on after this final act of compassion. They approach the tomb and prepare to descend into darkness, unaware that their compassion is a seedbed of hope, nurturing belief that accepts the facts but makes room for the unbelievable. *Can you believe it?*

The women are met with a series of surprises. The stone is already rolled away. None of the questions running through their minds—Who moved the stone? Is the body still there?—prepare them for the answers they receive. They enter the tomb and see a young man dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side of the tomb as if it were the most natural place to repose.

The women are anything but relaxed. They are terrified. Despite a lifetime of listening to the stories of God's faithfulness to Israel, despite hundreds of Sabbaths hearing the words of the prophets echo with hope against stony synagogue walls, despite hanging on to every word and action of Jesus as he led them toward Jerusalem, the women have no conceptual category to help them understand what they are witnessing. *Can you believe it?*

The angel's first words to the women prepare them for the resurrection announcement: "Do not be afraid." These words flow through the women and then cascade through the centuries like an ageless John the Baptist, filling valleys of doubt and moving mountains of disbelief. They create new pathways in the mind and heart, enabling the kind of vision that sees God's love untangling twisted humanity, God's peace reigning over the war-torn world, and God's grace conquering the darkness like a summer sunrise. *Can you believe it?*

Belief is often like the incoming tide, gently moving its way up the shoreline of our resistance. The angel lays out the facts: "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him" (16:6, NIV).

What do the women see as they stare into the shadows? Can they see a way out of their confusion, doubt, and fear? Can they see in the absence of his body the presence of a new age? They cannot, at least not yet. But the tide has turned, and unbelief does not preclude them from mission. From the place of death, they are sent out with a promise: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (16:7, NIV).

The women, trembling and bewildered, cannot fully obey. They go, but their fear prevents them from saying anything to anyone.

Here Mark's Gospel ends, poised in half-belief. Later manuscripts try to finish the story, but perhaps we should be content with the original ending. It asks us to face the difficult facts of our own existence and to step down into the dark tombs we encounter to see if authentic belief can be found amid the smell of death and the chill of fear.

It is a risky proposition, and the three women lead the way. They stumble out of the tomb disoriented and afraid, but they begin walking toward Jesus, and though Mark's Gospel ends, their story continues. They find their footing and then their voice, and their compassion and courage grant them the authority to ask us the question they spend the rest of their lives answering: *Can you believe it?* ■

the family breaks apart and crumbles to the ground, life is pieced back together, but faith remains in the rubble. *Can you believe it?*

Jesus was crucified and buried—even secular historians grant that truth. But is that all? Are we left in a perpetual Holy Saturday, our faith shattered at the foot of the cross, our hopes and dreams laid in the tomb next to the cold body of our dead Messiah? Do we wait like the disciples, cowering in fear behind locked doors? Do we move on, acknowledging the folly of naïve hope in a grown-up world, a world that does not waste its time on dead Messiahs? *Can you believe it?*

As the first Saturday passes and a new day dawns, Mark's Gospel tells us that three women approach the tomb with spices to complete the

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