

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

**“Too Good to be True?”**

By Eric Howell

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday

April 4, 2010

Easter can feel a little like a fairy tale or a fantasy, a wonderful story stretching the imagination about what is possible in this world. That would be a generous way to describe what the first disciples thought about the news they heard first thing Sunday morning: Jesus is not dead. He is alive.

Night-night time in our home these days is filled with fairy tales. Wonderful stories and magical places like Narnia and Hogwarts and Cinderella’s Castle and Oz, and a gingerbread house that two little girls (in our stories) approach for directions when they get lost in the forest. When the little girls skip over Strawberry Milk Creek, they leave behind the woods of pine and cedar and enter into Candy Land, a world where gumdrops grow on trees and the grass is made of licorice. They are amazed by Candy Land and enjoy filling their mouths, tummies, and pockets with the delights of the land flowing with milk chocolate and honey dew. It’s a fantasy world. It’s a fairy tale. And even though in our stories the little girls eat the arms off the nice gingerbread man who gives them directions when he points “go *that way*,” it’s a place where nothing bad really happens. It’s a wonderful place, so much so, that the girls want to go back again and again.

Frederick Buechner did some heavy thinking about the world that fairy tales create. He writes, “It is a world of magic and mystery, of deep darkness and flickering starlight. It is a world where terrible things happen and wonderful things too. It is a world where goodness is pitted against evil, love against hate, order against chaos, in a great struggle where often it is hard to be sure who belongs to which side because appearances are endlessly deceptive. Yet for all its confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good who live happily ever after.” (Telling the Truth, 81.)

Like life, fairy tales usually have some struggle to them. There are conflicts and hard choices and moral lessons and the need to believe things about yourself and the potential within you, and about the forces present in the world that are beyond your control or total understanding. Yet, unlike the way a lot of us go through life, fairy tales ask us to believe, or at least hope, that whatever was true about the world “once upon a time,” there is something about that world that is universally true for all time. Sleeping beauties awake, Cinderella’s feet fit glass slippers, Dorothies find their true home, and Narnia is protected and saved by good, kind Aslan, who gives his life for his people. “He’s not a tame lion.”

Fairy tales are different and richer than fantasy. In fantasy, there’s no texture, no trouble, no real humanness in the story. Fantasies are fun, but there’s nothing to learn, just to be indulged. There’s a great old traveling song that is such a fantasy.

*One evening as the sun went down and the jungle fire was burning; down the track came a hobo hiking and he said, “boys, I’m not turning. I’m headin’ for a land*

*that's far away by the crystal fountains. So come with me and we'll go see the Big Rock Candy Mountains. In the Big Rock Candy Mountains, all the cops have wooden legs. And the bulldogs all have rubber teeth and the hens lay soft boiled eggs. The farmer's trees are full of fruit and the barns are full of hay. Oh I'm bound to go where there ain't no snow, where the rain don't fall and the wind don't blow in the Big Rock Candy Mountains."*

That's pure fantasy—a world that is a complete reversal from ours in every way that makes that world devoid of the stuff of this life. It's a dream world. Here's my favorite line:

*"There ain't no short-handled shovels, no axes, saws, or picks. I'm a goin' to stay where you sleep all day; where they hung the jerk that invented work, in the Big Rock Candy Mountains."*

Fantasy and fairy tales are both dreams, but fantasy is too good to be true. This is the difference: fairy tales are just too good not to be true on the deeper levels of truth.

We read in the Old Testament that a man named Isaiah had a dream about life as he hoped it could be. Right in the middle of hard times, he offered a dream to people who were having really hard times in the real world. These were people who had vivid and recent memories of the terrible pain of war, death, and invasion. They watched their men cut down too early in life. They bore their children into a world that seemed to only promise a lifetime of terror and sadness. For himself and his neighbors, his people, he dreamed of a new heaven and a new earth. He dreamed of a time when in Jerusalem there would not be the sound of weeping anywhere, a time when little babies would not die, a time when if you lived short of 100 years old, it would be said of you that you died young. He dreamed of a time when people would build houses and live in them and plant gardens and eat the fruit. When people lived for more than the moment, lived with the kind of hope that you have to have to plant a tree, believing it will grow and you'll be around to see it. He even dreamed of a time when the wolf and lamb lay down together and the lion eats straw.

Isaiah's dream wasn't anything like the world they lived in. But, what sort of dream was this? Was it fantasy or fairy tale? Did it just paint an impossible picture of some sort of alternative universe, or did it offer a hope that could lift our eyes toward what is possible? The answer probably depends on what you believe about Easter, and by extension, all of the Bible and Christianity. Is it too good to be true or too good not to be true?

The women who first went to the tomb early on Sunday morning must have thought they were dreaming when they found the stone rolled away and heard the voice of angels, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." For the friends of Jesus, this would have been beyond hope. It's not like they went out to the tomb early Sunday crossing their fingers that their prayers had been answered, that Jesus would be alive again. Had they thought this was possible they surely would have prayed for it with all their hearts, but except in purely theoretical or theological terms, no one was looking for Jesus to be anywhere but where they laid Him Friday night. They did not ask, "Will Jesus still be dead?" All they asked

was, “Who do you think can move the stone so we can attend to his lifeless body?” Imagining Easter before it happened would have sounded like a fantasy only a child could have dreamed up, an impossible story.

Huddled in that very same Jerusalem that Isaiah dreamed about, but a city that had not realized Isaiah’s dream, the disciples must have thought they were dreaming when they heard about what was going on out at the tomb where Jesus lay, sealed behind a stone. The words seemed to them an idle tale: a fable, a story, a fantasy, too good to be true. The word in Luke 24 is *laros*: idle talk or foolishness. They did not believe this story.

And who can blame them. Who really believes fairy tales anyway? They are just stories, just creative imaginations, just characters made up with narrative plots whose twists and turns entice our imagination on a yellow brick road, or the gates of the Shire, but they aren’t real. Not like the world is real. Adults know better. Stones don’t just get rolled away in the real world. Burial cloths don’t get stacked neatly in the corner in the real world. Sorry Isaiah, it’s a nice story you tell, but we know the way the world really works. And you, John of Patmos, imagining a new heaven and new earth, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, imagining God dwelling with humankind. “They will be His people and God will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more; neither shall there be mourning nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.” It’s a nice story, John.

And Paul, with your bold challenge that death is swallowed up in victory and your pleasant sort of statement that faith, hope, and love remain, but the greatest of these is love. Are these fantasies too? Are these too good to be true?

On that Sunday morning, Peter runs to the tomb with these *laros* ringing in his ears of Jesus, dead and now alive again. Still not believing the story, he stoops down to peer into the tomb. In so doing, he, in that moment, just before sunrise, peering into the dark emptiness of the tomb, emptier even than he can yet believe, looks inside, and we all look over his shoulder. For all the other disciples, for everyone who ever had a flicker of hope in anything impossible, for anyone who ever had a dream that the impossible could happen, for those who prayed for the end of slavery but didn’t think it would come, and the fall of the Berlin Wall, but couldn’t believe it would fall, for those who struggled against apartheid, and those who pray for peace in every generation. For people who work to cure cancer. For those who wonder if it is possible that the person they love the most can be healed, for parents of sick babies, and children of abusive parents, for mommies who kiss their sons off to war, and war-torn villages tired of hoping for a better world, for people trying to cast off the gorilla of a slavish sin, and who pray that the temptation be taken away, for the one who kneels beside the hospital bed fervently pleading for her husband, for a miracle; for the person who wants to believe, really wants to, but just can’t quite get there, for the ones who still wonder...Peter peers into the void.

He doesn’t know it yet, but in the nothingness he sees, he sees everything. He sees Isaiah’s dream and John’s vision and Paul’s hope, and our salvation. He sees the impossible in what he doesn’t see. He sees God’s true fairy tale break into the usual grim reality of this world. It’s too good to be true? It’s too good not to be true.

What he once thought was just an idle tale becomes a story in which he, and all of us become transformed.

JRR Tolkien, who knew a little something about stories, wrote this about fairy tales and I think the same can be said about the Gospel, "Fairy tale does not deny the existence of sorrow and failure: the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of the deliverance; it denies (in the face of much evidence, if you will) universal final defeat...giving a glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief. It is the mark of the good fairy story, of the higher or more complete kind, that however wild its events, however fantastic or terrible the adventures, it can give to the child or man that hears it, when the 'turn' comes, a catch of the breath, a beat and lifting of the heart, near to (or accompanied by) tears. (Truth)"

The Bible, the Easter story in particular, is like a fairy tale, not in the sense that it is made up to amuse, though it can be entertaining, not in the sense that it is a narrative to teach moral lessons, though it does teach right and wrong; not in the sense that it's a story for children, though it is a story children love. The Bible is a fairy tale in the sense that it brings a sharp-eyed realism about the world as it is and a wide-eyed sure hope about the world as it can be, and will be, and must be, because it and God are too good not to be true.

Peering into the unknown darkness with Peter and Isaiah and John and Paul, and the women who came out that morning, and with everyone who hopes and needs for this to be true, and seeing precisely nothing, we in fact, in faith, see everything there is to see that really matters. In seeing what seems like nothing, we catch a glimpse of hope that once upon a time in a land far, far away, resurrection happened. It's the kind of story in which The End isn't the end. There's another chapter. It's like a chapter you don't see at first. You only see if you have...what? Courage? Hope? Faith? If there's something in you to turn to the page after the page that says, "This is the end." Like all good stories, the last chapter is the best. It's about a new heaven and a new earth and a new life and a new hope. And it's a tale worth sharing with whoever can hear it as more than fantasy, as something even other than fairy tale, as good news. And the best part is...it's still being written.