

An Easter Riddle

Deuteronomy 29:29

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The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law... Deuteronomy 29:29

An Easter riddle: what do a black and white, two-toned Ford station wagon, a tow truck, and Bilbo Baggins have to do with the Resurrection?

Let's start with the station wagon. My first car was a 1950 Ford station wagon. My two older sisters sold it to me for \$35.00. A year later, I sold it for \$100.00 and turned around and bought a 1960, two-toned, black and white sleek Ford station wagon with fins! It was powerful. – 428 cubic inch V8. That car was built for speed...it was smooth. It even had a radio – The radio didn't work... but it had knobs and everything. My first automatic transmission. It had a big gas tank. My friends nick-named it, 'The Ark'. I loved that car...

Except for one particular day, when its power got the best of me. I was driving into the mountains on a Saturday in November. I was late for the first cross-country skiing team time trial of the season. My coach had made it clear that if I was late, I was off the team for a couple of weeks. I don't remember why, but I was late, motivated to make the team and, therefore, driving way too fast, especially for conditions. A wet snow had fallen and the road was snow-packed. In front of me, the traffic slowed down – right when I wanted it to speed up. All of a sudden, the line in front of me came to a complete halt. I threw on the brakes. But the 'Ark' didn't stop quickly at any time, much less on snow-packed roads. Before I knew it, I had lost control, swerved off the highway to the right, going about 35 miles an hour, down a 15 foot embankment, and into about 3 feet of snow. It was a soft landing.

I was stuck. Completely stuck. When a 1960 ford station wagon is 15 feet down an embankment in 3 feet of snow, nothing any driver in the world does is going to get it out:

- Not a 428 cubic inch V8 engine – worthless to get you out...
- Rocking it forward and back won't help...
- Snow tires with studs? No good.
- 30 high school kids pushing? Nope.

By the way, I did make it to the race on time. I grabbed my skis and poles, hitchhiked 3 miles to the race, had a couple of minutes to wax, managed to hide from my coach who was livid I was so late, Threw my skis on and won the race! It's the only time I ever won! I think I still had so much adrenaline left in my system I flew around the track.

The Pessimism of Unbelief

Stuck. Just like the women who went to the tomb the three days after Jesus had been crucified. They were stuck in what Ken Fisher calls, "*The pessimism of unbelief.*" The pessimism of unbelief is: "The tendency to see all news as bad, or, if good, as something likely to morph into something bad."¹

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome could only see the bad news that Sunday morning. They were worried about being able to gain entrance so they could anoint Jesus' body. As far as they knew, Jesus was dead. That was bad news and they had accepted it as the truth. Then, when they saw the stone that had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, they saw that, too, as bad news, not good news. The stone being rolled away – a huge stone the text tells us – was the best news the world has ever heard! They saw it as bad. They were stuck in the pessimism of unbelief.

A lot of the world is stuck in that same unbelief today. According to recent polls, few Christians believe that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is a historical event. Because of that, they're stuck viewing the world and life itself from a vantage point of quiet despair. Maybe eternity has something good, but this life is only to be endured. Stuck

¹ Ken Fisher, regular column, Forbes, April, 2010.

Not everybody's stuck like that – but most are. Everybody is stuck in another way. We're stuck in our human condition called sin. Oh, I know about the greatness of human achievements and all that. It may sound silly to say we're stuck. We can create beautiful music, we've developed some fantastic civilizations over history, astounding works of art, philosophies of life, political ways to manage nations, and have harnessed technology that can take us to the moon and back.

But in spite of all this, we're still stuck. Technology doesn't give happiness. Music, the arts, philosophy and politics can't change human nature. They're good as far as they go; they just don't go very far. We cannot, even with everything within us, change our nature, even when we want to.

We can learn, cope a little better, grow a little bit, organize better. But lasting change – the kind we crave for ourselves and for the world is unattainable by our own power – by our own efforts. We're stuck.

The essence of our sin is unbelief – of not staking our lives on what God did in Christ – in trust. Unbelief leads to all the other things that mess life up: pride, scapegoating, lying, self-centeredness. It all comes out of not taking God at his word and seeking to live on our own.

There's nothing we can do about that unbelief and sin. We're stuck. Just like those women that day, and just like my 1960 Ford station wagon.

Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, this is the human condition.

The Tow Truck

That's where the tow truck comes in. That afternoon, after the race was over, I learned how good a sight a tow truck can be. And tow truck drivers are great. They crawl underneath your car, wherever it's stuck, and get all the mess all over them, so you don't have to. This particular driver was an old guy. He drove up, looked the situation over, told me to get out onto the highway and stop the traffic. Then he hooked his cable to my station wagon, came back to the truck, pulled a hydraulic lever, and pulled my station wagon back to the road as if nothing had ever happened.

When a big ol' station wagon is stuck like that, it takes a tow truck to get it out. You can't get it free any other way.

That's what the resurrection does. We're stuck. These women were stuck. The disciples were stuck. God takes our life into the risen life of Christ, and sets us free. He gives us faith – belief - as a gift. When we use that faith by entrusting our life to his resurrected life, we're free.

Note this well. God does not make bad situations merely more bearable. God removes the old and replaces it with his new life. That tow truck driver didn't drive up and give me advice about speed limits. He didn't bring blankets to keep me warm until spring. He didn't stand on the side of the road and tell me to spin my wheels fast. He hooked up a cable and pulled me out.

I don't know exactly how it works when God takes a life into the risen life of Christ and pulls it out of whatever it's stuck in. That's one of those secret things that only God knows about. What I DO know is the revealed truth that Christ is alive and his life now saves any life connected to him. **BECAUSE HE IS ALIVE.** He pulls us out of whatever has us stuck.

The whole world is stuck: stuck in sin, stuck in grief, stuck in emptiness, stuck in death and God comes and pulls us out. God doesn't throw advice at us. God enters our lives and removes us from whatever has held us away from him, and sets us free, forever, by his mighty act of resurrection.

This story ends with the young man, probably an angel, telling the women to tell the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee – *“He's going ahead of you into Galilee.”* he says. And he is, he's going ahead of you every day into the life he has planned for you.

Riddle Solved

So. Riddle solved. The Ford two-toned station wagon stuck in the snow? Our condition apart from God. The tow truck? A picture of what God does about our condition through the resurrection. But there's one left.

What on earth does Bilbo Baggins have to do with all this? I'm so glad you asked. The resurrection, where God takes hold of our life and sets us free is

liberating, but it's also unsettling. It's wonderfully and thoroughly disruptive. As long as we keep God at a safe distance, life can go on in a comfortable, though stuck way forever. But when God enters, it's tumultuous. Uprooting, Unsettling.

You know who Bilbo is, don't you? He's the original Hobbit from J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* saga. He's one of those unforgettable characters in literature. He begins the story as a comfortable, uninvolved bystander. Let me read you the first lines of *The Hobbit*:

In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit...This Hobbit was a very well-to-do Hobbit, and his name was Baggins. The people in the neighborhood considered the Bagginses very respectable because they never had any adventures or did anything unexpected: you could tell what a Baggins would say on any question without the bother of asking him. This is a story of how Bilbo Baggins had an adventure, and found himself saying things altogether unexpected. He may have lost the neighbor's respect, but he gained – well, you will see whether he gained anything in the end...

The rest of the story is that Bilbo's life was never the same again. He went on a great adventure and returned, but never to the life he had before. The same is true for us. When we believe in Jesus Christ, we cast ourselves in his resurrected life. When we do that – everything changes. We go from a comfortable, predictable life to a life of wonderful, thorough turbulence in which God, the Holy Spirit, turns everything in us and around us upside down. The women that morning were initially afraid and confused.

Then the story got out and everyone who heard it and trusted in God because of it had their lives turned upside down – forever. The women in this story never went back to a life of the pessimism of unbelief. Everything – everything changed. So it will be with us, if we accept Christ as the Lord of our life.

This morning I invite you to allow this risen Lord, who reigns over all life and all time to take you into his resurrected life and be forever changed. Unstuck, towed out, and onto the adventure of a new life.