

The Easter Run

Text: Psalm 118: 21-24; John 20: 1-10

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Tucked away in a small Parisian museum that was once a railway station, there hangs an Easter painting quite unlike any other.ⁱ It's the work of Swiss artist Eugene Bernand and since it's first viewing in 1898, it has been hailed as the greatest Easter painting ever in marriage of brush and canvas.ⁱⁱ

Curiously, there is not an open tomb portrayed as one might expect, or a garden setting, or a cross, or even a hint of Jesus. Instead, it depicts the most famous foot race in the bible, that of Peter and John sprinting and straining toward the tomb on that first Easter day.

Mary Magdalene had just discovered something very strange: the stone had been rolled from the tomb. She had run to tell them. And now they are running to see for themselves. You might even imagine the scene: two grown men running like excited and competing boys, one slightly leading the other; their faces and hair sculpted by the morning breeze with hope and also trembling for the whole world.



And so today, I want to talk with you about running. I want us to think about the running set in motion on that first Easter Day. And here's why. If you read in parallel the four Gospel accounts, with all of the varied details revealed, each one reports something about what I'll call the Easter Run.



Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.ⁱⁱⁱ All of them! This is no coincidence! And here's the nub of it all these years later. The Easter Run is trying to tell us something. It opens up a kinesthetic picture of what happens when people discover in fear or great joy that their world has been turned absolutely upside down. News like this simply has to move! It erupts and powers

muscle and bone, limb and body as every fiber of the human heart, soul and mind has to do something to respond.

So trace the stories with me. See for yourself. Or maybe, more personally, see within yourself.

Let's start again with that painting. Peter and John are running toward the tomb. In the words of Halford Luccock, "their foot-race is the thrill of glad news, even before their hearts were sure it was true or what it even meant."^{iv}

It's the very best of the very best and they knew it! It's as St. Irenaeus said almost as far back as that day: "The glory of God is a human being fully alive!"

And it wasn't just these two men. Mary and Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Salome were also seen running that day with amazement and joy, trepidation and hope.

Some moments are like that, aren't they? Some experiences are laced with dazed and incredulous exuberance and energy. Our Karen always likes to hear the story of the first day of her life. It was 3:30 in the morning as Pam told me in clear and certain terms that it was time to get to the hospital. In an instant, everything became a mad dash but in a surreal kind of suspended animation. I ran outside to warm-up the car (After all it was January in Connecticut!). I scrambled for the overnight bag (The kind of thing that you put in a certain place so you will remember *for sure* where it is in a frantic moment! NOT!) Then I carefully brought Pam to the car. Then, almost forgetting, I ran back into the house again to get Tim. And then I ran back out one more time with such velocity and great joy that I pulled the doorknob clear off the front door!

We all have ways of marking our best and most life-infected moments! And those who ran that Easter day had something so amazing to discover and tell that it was as if they had wings on their feet! Good news doesn't stroll! It moves fast!

But that's not all that was going on. Other measures of physical and emotional dissonance were at foot as well. Because by biblical account, there was running *from* the tomb as much as there was running *to* it. Joy, anticipation, stupendous gladness were only a part of the story. There was fear just as surely, and well there should have been. There was trepidation and uncertainty and frantic running, too.

One church historian writes, "the resurrection implies disturbance."^v For in fact, if Jesus really was back, everything had to change. Nothing could remain the same. This would not be entirely good news – then or now – to the powers and principalities. It meant God matters. It meant every life matters. It meant that there is a "life-saving, life-giving Spirit, which works beyond the control, expectation and comprehension of human beings."^{vi} This is big stuff, ginormous stuff, and it scares the structure and step and dominion out of the hands of power.

This fearful, apprehensive, dissonance was made so real again this week as Brussels erupted in senseless terrorism. Understandably, people run in fear, and once again, we all saw the panic and fright. And, also, understandably, people do not know where to look for the source of calm and life and hope. They don't know what will happen next, or when, or where or how. We are all of us that vulnerable, and so were the first – and archetypal – responders, reactors, runners that first Easter. What in the world was going on?

So lest we get too comfortable about the running that day, or too self-assured, fear and trepidation were a part of Easter, too.

And then more. Scripture also tells us that there is another kind of running. It's not running from the tomb or toward it. It's not in glory or fear. It is, rather, in the resolve of Easter Day, that Jesus goes before us everyday, and calls us and asks us to follow.

I'll call this the unsentimental part of what happened. "Because Easter represents a promise and a demand. We love the promise. But the demand is harder because it asks that we not simply sympathize with the crucified Christ, but that we actively pledge ourselves to the Risen One."^{vii}

And here's that running all over again! "Therefore, since we are surrounded by this gift let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the Pioneer and Perfector of our faith, who, for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of God."

Run! And not tepidly or reluctantly, but with perseverance! Let the power gain velocity! Get moving! See it as long-distance and not a sprint!

Ted Loder^{viii}, a poetic companion to my soul, spreads out some suggestions just in case we are wondering how to do that . . .

It's Easter Holy One,
so in the silences between our heartbeats,
enable us to become expanders of life
scatterers of laughter
singers of songs
makers of peace
spreaders of good news
healers of wounds
tellers of truth
practitioners of mercy
sharers of joy
weavers of community
walkers in humility
fulfillers of dreams
spun for us in Jesus
our brother, our savior, our Lord.

One more thing. Elliott and I have our running shoes on today and will race you home! And this is the best part. There is not one single winner in this one. It's the whole human family who wins. In the living, loving, embracing, astounding presence and spirit of Jesus!

So lace up your running shoes! Ready? On you mark! Get set! Go! Amen!

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ⁱ Elise Ehrhard, "The Greatest Easter Painting Ever Made," Google Search.

ⁱⁱ Google Search, Eugene Bernand.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 28: 8; Mark 16:8; Luke 24: 12; John 20: 2, 4.

^{iv} Robert Luccock. Halford Luccock Treasury. Abingdon Press, 1963, p. 52.

^v Halford E. Luccock. Living A Thousand Lives. Pilgrim Press, 1983, p. 19.

^{vi} Chandler W. Gilbert. "Presence, Power, Life and Love" an unpublished sermon, April 19, 1981.

^{vii} William Sloane Coffin. Letters to a Young Doubter. Westminster/John Knox Press, 2005, p. 170-171.

^{viii} Ted Loder. My Heart in My Mouth: Prayers for Our Lives. Innisfree Press, 2000, p. 33.