

Highland Views

“The Greatest Story has Yet to be Told”

This piece was originally written as my weekly “Highland Views” column for the Religion page of our hometown newspaper, the Asheville Citizen-Times, a USA Today affiliate (columns are listed [here](#)). I write as a freethinking humanist who stays in relationship with people of faith—including family.

As I was writing I realized it may be something worth running by my Patheos/TCP colleagues. Though I fully understand many of the formerly faithful are tired of The Story, I simply seek to highlight a fresh way to read the narrative. Think of it as a Lenten lesson for the faithless.

Keep in mind I’m used to writing for a “mixed audience” here in a looser loop of the Bible Belt, which, these days, barely holds up the pants of the pious.

The history of Christianity is based and built upon a supposedly upbeat story of goodness and godness told throughout this season of Lent. The narrative begins with Jesus up on a donkey riding up into Jerusalem and ends with him up a hill, nailed up on an execution tree. Not exactly an uplifting image.

But wait. The “up-ness” isn’t over. The story continues to a triumphant crescendo—the whole point of the story appears to be about Life rather than Death (what happened to that part? How come a dead and deadly tree became the main symbol of The Story of Life?). After three days down in a borrowed tomb, the crucified criminal Christ gets up, eats some bread and fish and floats up and away into the sky. From his throne on high the King who once visited an obscure patch of this planet long enough to get himself hung up, will look down on his subjects and “judge the quick and the dead.”

For many of us, saturated in this salvation story from an early age, it’s so familiar we could recite it almost word for word, step by step. It’s a violent, bloody and tragic story with a twist worthy of a Netflix original (thumbs up or down). The falling and rising, rising and falling is dizzying, but effective in keeping us off balance.

We will never be able (or allowed) to forget this story. Maybe we shouldn’t forget. No need to worry—many are committed to making sure we never forget the story. It is the “greatest story ever told” because it’s the *only* story ever told by those who believe the story and believe that it must be believed.

Here's what I'm thinking. I don't mean to be disrespectful to ask some difficult questions here, so stay with me.

What if "The Story" we have been told is not really the story—that is, the one that was originally told, or the one that actually happened?

Could it be possible that the "official" Storytellers (including Paul) have shaped the story in some way it was not meant to be told, making it all about sin and sacrifice?

What if The Story is true, to a point (the death of a rebel rabbi), but then floats up into imagination?

Might it be possible that the "triumph over death" crescendo was added to make the story more dramatically and emotionally mysterious, supernatural? "Wow, it must be true, it's so fantastic!" (did these folks go to school?).

What if The Story ended with the blood-stained execution tree and a battered body laid down in someone's unmarked grave? What would be the impact of that in our world today? Would masses of believers suddenly disbelieve any of The Story?

Clearly stated: *If Jesus was dead and gone, would Christianity and faith collapse?*

It seems to me that secular people might still appreciate The Story on some level. Many who have no more interest in the Church or Religion won't be drawn to consider this, but for other nonbelievers there may be something to salvage.

A conscientious freethinker could find this narrative relevant: after three years of storytelling among poor folk and arguing with self-righteous god-defenders, a homeless heretic ends up with a handful of outcast friends before he's unjustly detained, tried and executed by the State. Maybe not a unique vignette but a respectable tale.

There are Christians who firmly believe that "without the resurrection there is no faith." I remember studying that kind of "apologetics" (defense of the faith). Frankly, all the arguments circle back time and again to one thing: Just have faith.

For the rest of us, who don't find faith very compelling any longer, The Story may include us more than we thought.

What if non-believers could tell The Story even better than believers? Shocking? I don't think so. Large numbers of atheists and agnostics respect bits and pieces of the Jesus story. Gandhi, a Hindu, the Dalai Lama, a Tibetan Buddhist, and Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish rabbi, each revered Jesus and his message. They were

greatly influenced by the example of service in the secular world. In other words, anyone concerned for justice and lovingkindness can charge their batteries a little from this ancient story. Faith not included, or necessary.

Many modern biblical scholars would agree that The Story has been shaped to conform to ecclesiastical needs and creeds. The Story has been a useful tool to propagate a particular interpretation of the narrative to solidify power and privilege. The Story has been “owned” and “sold” for a high price: a free and reasoning mind.

Secular voices may herald a new kind of salvation. Speaking without a theological agenda, non-theists can read and tell The Story without supernatural glasses, and with clear vision they could “preach” pragmatic lessons of love, compassion and justice via “secular sermons” (aka, talks, lectures, chats).

Those who think they know (or think they control) the message might do well to dialogue with those of us who have The (traditional) Story burned into our brains, but seek new ways of understanding that make sense for a common world filled with the faithful as well as freethinkers.

I once wrote (in *Life After Faith*) that “the forests of faith” need to fall. What I meant was that more crosses mean less trees, more otherworldly talk means less down-to-earth action. There are real-world consequences to the “official version” of The Story—not the least of which is destruction of the environment (in the fallen world) and making death somehow more attractive than life.

There’s no longer any need to “follow Jesus” up the hill to the execution tree—to commit “sacred suicide,” physically or mentally. Was he leading his followers UP, or was he urging them to live better DOWN—a qualitatively different kind of life, in the deeply valued place where it was evident that Someone “so loved the world”? (the “official version” tends to skip these important lines, such as the first lines of the Sermon on the Mountain).

I don’t know, maybe we can “resurrect” the essentials of The Story and take it back from those who have mishandled it—maybe we can’t. I suppose we could leave it and move on. Yet, might it be possible to say the greatest story is what lies ahead? Could we at least try to re-think the ancient narratives as we shape our own Story for the here and the now, a Story that, like it or not, includes both faithless and faithful?

Jesus is in his grave, long dead and dissolved into the earth. He has no more breath, blood or bones. We do. That’s the best “good news” we have to tell in a world that needs no more gods, up or down, but constantly seems hungry or thirsty for new and better stories.

I find that downright uplifting, don't you?

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