

Grand Scheme

I listened to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* this lent. Because what better way to encapsulate Lent than with 35 hours of depressing Russian literature? Tolstoy, supposedly, reflected himself and his thoughts in one of his characters named Levin. Levin, near the end of the book is beside himself with depression, he looks at the farmhands on his estate and thinks:

"Why is it all being done?" he thought. "Why am I standing here, making them work? What are they all so busy for, trying to show their zeal before me? What is that old Matrona, my old friend, toiling for? (I doctored her, when the beam fell on her in the fire)" he thought, looking at a thin old woman who was raking up the grain, moving painfully with her bare, sun-blackened feet over the uneven, rough floor. "Then she recovered, but to-day or to-morrow or in ten years she won't; they'll bury her, and nothing will be left either of her or of that smart girl in the red jacket, who with that skillful, soft action shakes the ears out of their husks. They'll bury her and this piebald horse, and very soon too," he thought, gazing at the heavily moving, panting horse that kept walking up the wheel that turned under him. "And they will bury her and Fyodor the thrasher with his curly beard full of chaff and his shirt torn on his white shoulders--they will bury him. He's untying the sheaves, and giving orders, and shouting to the women, and quickly setting straight

the strap on the moving wheel. And what's more, it's not them alone--me they'll bury too, and nothing will be left. What for?"

Similar thoughts were expressed by a King, Solomon, who had everything under the sun, and saw how he would leave it all behind. Vanity of vanities.

Similar thoughts come our way too, I think. Should we take the time to look up from our screens and bellies. Should we look at our place in a universe and how small we are spinning off on the edge of space, so insignificant - unless you decide to stop paying taxes that will get you noticed. But here we spin and should we die, well, it all goes on spinning without us, but don't worry, they'll still tax that too.

And what hope are we offered? "Get some new stuff to recapture your youth, quick!" "Justify or self medicate that guilt." "Get busy living, and stay busy so you don't have to think about it." But folks that boss of yours will replace you in two weeks should you drop dead today – so why do we live our lives for them?

People try all these things, and so much more, when faced with the reality of our impermanence. Does the Church have anything to offer? Or is it just more of the same?

In the HBO special Band of Brothers there is, I think, a moving scene where it shows all the soldiers in a Church listening to a choir and they sit in the pews relaxing, listening, some chatting. But then they start to fade away, all the ones

who had been killed, gone. Their spots empty. And like Levin we are forced to see the harsh reality of war – of life – that we will all get buried and disappear.

Are these pews not the same? A year ago, five years ago, 10, 20. Who was sitting in these pews. And who will sit after us. And so we gasp in relief when a new family comes, and we shudder when we see a section clear out. But those ebbs and flows folks doesn't change the fact that one day, you won't be sitting there for one reason or another.

So what's the point?

Well, in the grand scheme, if all we do is flower then fade, other than that rebellious act of living itself, I don't know what the point would be at all. And this is what the world feeds our kids "you are accidents who crawled out of the slime and you will return to it one day." And we wonder why there is no basis for morality, or why they are all depressed? Because they see no point in life either!

I'm sure the disciples, when their leader and king was put in a tomb, thought similarly. His spot at the table empty. His voice and leadership, gone. His miracles were pretty cool, I'm sure, but that's over. Those people will get sick again and die. Who was he? He was supposed to save? But that's over, better go back to fishing, because there is no point in that ministry anymore. No point.

Unless it wasn't over. Unless the grand scheme of things, and I mean this as broadly as possible, the grand scheme for the universe, for time and space, for each individual, for creation, animals, trees, winds and waves, you and me, unless the grand scheme all along HINGED upon this event. Someone dying, someone living again.

Because then the story is most definitely not over. The plan is not foiled. In fact, it just gained it's greatest authenticity. And you, as has been promised, are a part of that plan which means your life is not tangential or meaningless, and it certainly isn't over when you die.

Which means things matter, yes even the things you do. There is permanence to them and your relationships. And so maybe we should fight against the toxicity in them and perhaps see how we can even bring and point people to this Risen Savior – spouses, children, friends, acquaintances. Suddenly they all matter. Suddenly the rat race of priorities maybe shouldn't be our compass. Suddenly, even in the midst of poverty, meekness, and pain there might actually be hope! And so Paul in our epistle lesson encouraged us to, now that we are partakers of a resurrection victory, to pursue things that are above. Because it matters.

IF Jesus is alive, the game is not over. The grand scheme is still on. And the answer to “what's the point” is clear – the point, the end game, is life abundant and life

eternal. So the farmers can toss those sheaves freely, and rejoice in the bread it makes, and next year do the same, why not! A few carbs taste good, enjoy them!

And should, over the years, we grow frail and the bread not taste so savory... we can steel ourselves with hope, hope of the resurrection that we go to an even greater feast. A feast with rich food and aged wine, well refined. Isaiah 25. And it means that the spots in the pews may shift over the years, but that is hardly pointless, because that means those people have found comfort and hope in a Savior here, and have transferred to a greater celebration, the Church triumphant, and we will join them there one day. And again, we, as a body of believers played a part in transferring them there – what is more meaningful than that!? What is more relevant? What matters more? Each prayer form the lady in the nursing home, each card sent, Sunday school lesson, visit, communion rail – suddenly, if Jesus is Risen and we have been pulled into a Grand Scheme, suddenly it all matters. Jesus himself says, “If you give even a cup of cold water, you will by no means lose your reward.”

This of course, again, hinges on whether that man, Jesus, actually rose. If they find the bones of Jesus, folks, we are in trouble. But I’m not holding my breath, nor am I worried.

You have heard the arguments for the existence of God based on the laws of thermodynamics, morals, consciousness and so on (and if you haven't – I commend to you our Bible classes each Sunday or an adult instruction class).

Pretty much everyone with sense, including atheists, acknowledge Jesus really lived and died. The historical evidence is too overwhelming. But what about this resurrection. Do you, crazy fairy tale Christian, believe a man beat death?

We know the “swoon” theory isn't true, saying that he just passed out then got back up. Because even if it was true, he sure wouldn't look healed and whole three days later – he'd need an emergency room. And we know that there is no historical record of anyone producing a body – even though we know they had it on their minds that the disciples “might try to steal it.” Which leads us to that possibility, “did they steal it?” Then why go to their deaths proclaiming it?

That's the move we make as Christians, right? And it's a good one. I have recently seen some pushback on it, atheists claiming that we don't have any good evidence for the persecution of the disciples. So bear with me, briefly. I think this matters – again, if he didn't get up, this is a sham. So bear with me:

First point – we will look briefly at the evidence for some the apostles and their deaths, but I want to, first of all, make it very clear of what evidence we DO NOT have, any scrap, any hint, that any of them ever recanted and said Jesus didn't rise.

And I think that information would have been HIGHLY coveted by the Roman empire or the Jewish leaders and disseminated.

Second point, I will be showing some evidence outside the Bible, called extra biblical evidence, but make no mistake. The Bible is still evidence! Those documents are real and the names and dates and cities in them are too. The argument for the resurrection is NOT an argument from silence, not even close.

Third point, it is true that many accounts of the deaths of the disciples are apocryphal – meaning they came around much later and don't have a lot of evidence. Luther himself even pokes fun at these Church traditions when he speaks of relics saying, paraphrased: “You can find 18 of the 12 apostles buried in Germany alone!” Right? Someone's wrong there.

However, I did some homework, feel free to do your own: Are there any disciples we know of that were persecuted and/or killed proclaiming the resurrection?

Which, again, would eliminate the motive of the lie – that Jesus rose and they really just stole the body. Here is some historical data for you: We know that Paul was a real historical figure. We know he was killed for proclaiming the Gospel.

Not only are his own letters so widespread, and his familiarity with the other apostles, but he is attested to by Clement of Rome (1st century), Roman Historian and unbeliever Tacitus, Tertullian, Dionysus, and more in the 3rd century. But you

might say “Pastor he wasn’t there at the resurrection, he only claims to have seen Jesus later.” Fair enough, these same extrabiblical writers (and not all of them Christian) give testimony to Peter. I dare to make a Pun on the meaning of Peter’s name – our evidence here is fairly rock solid. They lived, and, more to the point, they died, for Jesus in Nero’s persecution in Rome. Why do that if it’s a lie?

Especially when it wasn’t just them. Maybe those two, Peter and Paul, got together and Rome and decided to make up Christianity and die for it -maybe they were delusional. Well then, What of James, Jesus’ brother, who is well attested to by not only Paul, Hegesippus, and also Josephus, a Jewish historian, who writes of his death, for Jesus in an entirely different location and time.

Additionally, Eusebius, a Church historian, writes of the martyrdoms of many of the apostles already around 300ad. A little late, yes, but it’s there 200 years or so after the disciples deaths.

Finally, John has a mountain of evidence from Irenaeus and Polycarp. And while John didn’t die for Jesus, he was the only apostle (If Eusebius can be trusted) to die of old age, but he certainly had his share of persecutions and exiles.

I encourage you, if you doubt, do your homework. The other disciples have more or less attestation in history. But it is undeniable something is going with these guys. It is undeniable there was an explosion of believers in the resurrection in the

1st century. Real people. Real Pain. For a lie? Or for a Real Savior who made them brave in the face of death?

Can then we be brave in the face of death? Can we find meaning in our lives, and joy in the days given, can we spite the darkness of the world and our hearts and the grave, and find forgiveness and hope in a risen Lord? That's the invitation. Take part in the grand scheme of our Lord, who is making all things new.

I close with an excerpt from Psalm 42: Why are you cast down, O my soul,
and why are you in turmoil within me?

Hope in God; for I shall again praise him,
my salvation[c] 6 and my God.

The pews may change. We may be buried. But the Lord is Risen, which means we will praise him again, maybe not in these pews, but certainly, as he has promised to all his people who rejoice in this resurrection victory – you will praise him again at the victory feast.