

## The Rest of the Story

Some of us remember a time when Paul Harvey was one of America's most popular radio personalities. His claim to fame was a regular feature called, "The Rest of the Story." Harvey would tell a story that appeared to be only mildly interesting and not particularly noteworthy.

The catch was that in telling it, he would leave out one key detail. At the very end, he would reveal that key detail. As the significance of the story suddenly came to light, he would finish by saying, "And now you know the rest of the story."

Here's an example of the kind of story Harvey did, although this is not one that he used:

Early in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a man was walking down the street in a city in Virginia, dressed in well-worn, working day clothes. He was quietly going about his own business when the door of a butcher shop flew open in front of him. Out stepped a very well-dressed, pompous man followed closely by the butcher, who was holding a large, bad-tempered turkey.

The self-important fellow glanced around and saw this plainly dressed guy walking alone. He summoned the man and signaled the butcher to hand over the turkey to him. "Follow me," he barked at his new recruit.

The two marched through the streets in single file, one strutting arrogantly in front, followed by the other lugging this large, flapping turkey. Eventually, they reached an expensive house, where a servant came out and collected the turkey.

The snooty man tossed a coin to his errand runner, and without a word of thanks bid him go on his way. The man who had carried the turkey for him then walked home, flipping the coin in the air, and chuckling to himself.

At this point, there is nothing noteworthy about this incident, other than to demonstrate there were still incidents of the old British upper class privilege in America.

But you might be interested in the name of the fellow who was rudely commandeered into service.

It was John Marshall, who was at that time the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, one of the most powerful men in the nation, in fact, in all of U.S. history.

Marshall could have put the arrogant man in his place with just a few words. He could have reduced him to a cowering mess, begging for forgiveness for the shabby treatment of a great public figure. He could have used his influence to make that man's life miserable.

Marshall, however, lived by the creed that power was something to be used in the service of others or it was not to be used at all. Setting his ego aside, he just went along with this ridiculous scenario. Instead of getting puffed up and angry, he found himself actually amused by the absurdity of it.

And now you know the rest of the story, one that gives stunning insight into the character of one of America's foremost political figures and how things have changed.

Our Gospel story for today contains a classic "now you know the rest of the story" element.

Two people are walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, a small town about seven miles away. Neither is among Jesus' 12 disciples; rather they are part of a larger group of people devoted to Jesus, many of whom followed him around on his travels.

It is the afternoon of Easter day. These two are bewildered and emotionally drained by all that has taken place these past days. They had entered Jerusalem with such high hopes, believing that Jesus was the Messiah, the Promised One who would defeat Israel's enemies, restore Israel to its former glory, and bring about an endless peaceful reign of Israel.

It was all going so well. Jesus had demonstrated awesome powers. He had arrived in Jerusalem to the roars of the crowd. The people were on his side. Jesus was so close to claiming the throne; the age of the Messiah was at hand.

And then the whole thing came crashing down. It happened so fast. Suddenly Jesus was betrayed, condemned, and crucified.

So much hope. Now crushing disappointment.

Add to that the weirdness of this morning. Incredible reports of a vision to some women that Jesus had risen, and their reminder that Jesus had said something about being killed and then rising on the third day.

The reaction of the apostles, who considered the women delirious. Then Peter finding that at least part of the women's story checked out. Jesus was gone from the tomb.

None of this makes sense to Cleopas and his pal. Jesus was killed by corrupt politicians, in the most shameful way possible. There is no way that would happen to the Messiah.

The Messiah was invincible. He was to come in power and majesty to rule and bring justice to the land. Jesus did not do that. So whatever Jesus was, he wasn't the Messiah. Obviously, they had made a big mistake.

As for what else was swirling around in rumor land, that was strange, but it really didn't change what happened to Jesus. Cleopas and friend were so convinced that Jesus was not the Messiah that even with all these bizarre claims of an empty tomb that day, they did not wait around in Jerusalem to see what happened.

For them, it was over. Even if, by some miracle, Jesus was pulling off some kind of magic trick—even if this rising on the third day was something he had predicted--what was the point of that? They had been duped once on this Messiah promise; they weren't going to fall for that again.

So they left town that very day. They headed back home, sadder but wiser, to resume their lives.

On their trip, they were still trying to sort out just what had happened in this crazy week. How could it all have gone south so quickly? Just what was Jesus' game? Was he somehow alive like people were claiming? If so, what did that mean? If not, what was the explanation for these stories?

They were going over these events as they walked. In fact, it appears they were having a fairly lively and loud discussion, when a stranger came near, and asked "What are you talking about?"

At first they just stood there, looking sad. There may have been some fear involved as well. Jesus' followers had been in hiding, anxious that the authorities might be after them as well. Maybe they shouldn't have been so free with their thoughts out in the open where a stranger could hear them.

Finally Cleopas breaks the awkward silence by cautiously phrasing a question that gives no hint of their position.

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there, these days?”

“What things?” the stranger answers innocently.

If this man truly doesn't know, then he obviously doesn't have a dog in this fight. So Cleopas lets down his guard and fills him in. At one point, he says, “We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”

That's in the past tense. He doesn't think that now. Jesus was no Messiah.

At the same time, he cannot make heads or tails of what this exhilarating and ultimately disappointing adventure with Jesus was all about, which is why he can't stop talking about it.

The conversation then takes a shocking turn as the stranger, who appeared to know nothing about this whole Jesus movement, now scolds the two for not recognizing what was right in front of their faces.

“So Jesus could not be the Messiah because he suffered and was executed instead of taking over the government and ruling in power? Haven't you read the Scriptures? That is exactly what you would expect the Messiah to do.”

These two don't have a clue what the stranger is talking about, so he invites them into a Bible study. We don't have any notes on how he presented that study. But based on what the stranger was saying, that he started with Moses and then went through all prophets, we can make a pretty good guess.

He started at the point in Exodus where God had enough of people breaking the covenant God had set up for their benefit. They were so sinful and arrogant and heartless that God came this close to ending this relationship with humans.

We see that God decided to forgive rather than wipe the slate clean. But the stranger moves on to the books of the prophets where we see the same thing happening, time after time. God loving and forgiving; people defying God, acting selfishly and causing destruction.

Is this ever going to stop? Are people going to take seriously who God is and what God desires? How can injustice be brought to an end if people refuse to act in justice? Maybe it can't happen.

The stranger walks them through the books of the prophets, where God keeps wrestling with this dilemma. Is there any way to ensure justice short of destroying creation? Can you love people and destroy them at the same time?

The prophets reveal that God finally finds an answer to how to remain true to both love and justice. God will bring about justice not by destroying sinful humanity, but by overwhelming it with love.

Justice will come in the concept of the Messiah: a being so connected with God, so much a part of God, yet so thoroughly human, that through this Messiah, all the world will finally understand the height and depth of God's love. Through this Messiah, all people in the world will receive hope of lives filled with peace, joy, and justice.

Unfortunately, until that Messiah came and people could actually experience up close what God is really like, they were susceptible to wrong guesses. For centuries people reading about the Messiah had put their own spin on it, according to their own desires.

People crave political power, military power, economic power, revenge, status, and redemption. And so in their minds, the Messiah was the promised one who would bring these things to the people of Israel.

They took the idea of the Messiah and made him in their own image: a mighty king who would come and destroy all of Israel's enemies, who would establish Israel over all other nations and lead it to a time of unprecedented peace and prosperity.

When Jesus came along, that was the prevailing view of the expected Messiah. The people saw Jesus' remarkable power and wisdom and charisma, and wondered, "Is this the Promised One?"

Many decided he was and they tried to help the process along. In the Gospel of John, thousands converged on Jesus to declare him king. Jesus wanted none of that.

Has it ever seemed odd to you that the people who on Palm Sunday were ecstatic in their praise of Jesus were shouting for him to be crucified just a few days later? What would cause such a bizarre and dramatic change of heart?

What if you thought Jesus was the Messiah, the warrior king who has come to fight for their freedom from Roman oppression and establish the mightiest nation on earth?

Then, a few days later you hear Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane order Peter to put away his sword “for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.” These are not the words of expected Messiah.

It becomes crystal clear over these few days that Jesus is not what they thought he was. Some of his biggest backers may even have felt betrayed, which accounts for some of the venom hurled his way. The crucifixion clinches it for people like Cleopas. That’s why they were so demoralized and confused.

Perhaps in his Bible Study, this stranger pointed out that Messiah means “Anointed one.” That it does not refer to a military or political leader but simple to a person set apart by God and enabled for a special task. That task was to redeem creation by overwhelming it with love.

As he’s going through the prophets, the stranger likely pointed out Isaiah 53: *He was despised and rejected by others, a man of suffering and acquainted with grief. He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.*

Jesus *was* the Messiah, the one from God who had come into the world. But he did not bring the kingdom the people were hoping for, or that his disciples were hoping for.

Instead, the Messiah had come to show the true nature of God. To show how great is God’s love. The Messiah was God’s final answer to the paradox of love and justice. Justice will come about in creation not by destroying the failure of humanity, but by overwhelming it with love.

After he explains all this to them, the two compassionately invite the stranger to sit and share a meal with them. Before he leaves them, the stranger reveals one key bit of information. This was Jesus talking to them.

And now they know the rest of the story.

Now we know, too, know the rest of the story. We know what really happened on Calvary's hill and at the tomb of Easter morning. It wasn't a magic trick. It wasn't a power play. The Messiah came to bring justice to creation, not by destroying the failure of humanity, but by overwhelming it with love.