



The Great Surprise

By Kelly Fryer

She couldn't afford to do it when I was little and so last fall my mom took me to Disneyworld's newest park, Animal Kingdom, for my birthday. Yes, she is that awesome. My favorite ride was the Kilimanjaro Safari. You get on an oversized jeep with about 25 other people and rumble across some of Africa's most stunning terrain. But it was the six-year old girl squeezed between her parents, sitting behind me, who made it such a wild and wonderful adventure. From the moment our journey began, she was jumping out of her skin with excitement. "Momdad, momdad, MOM, DAD!!" she shouted. "Look, look, LOOK at the lions! Do you see the elephants?! Over there – it's a HIPPO!!!"

Throughout the trip, this little girl was an enthusiastic tour guide, her joy infecting us all. But, then, the ride stopped. When we pulled up to the exit, the girl stepped onto the platform, folded her arms angrily across her chest. "Well," she huffed dramatically. "I didn't see any monkeys."

Sound familiar?

The Great Excuse

A lot of us are, by nature or by nurture, prone to focus on the things we don't have and think we need instead of recognizing, celebrating, and working with what we do have and can do. If I'm honest, I fall into that category myself and have to work hard to counter it. That's especially true when things get tough—like, for example, in the middle of an economic meltdown on the tail end of a decade spent on "orange alert." But I don't think my little Disney friend and I are alone. These days, that kind of scarcity mindset and the fear that lies behind it pervades a lot of congregations, judicatories, denominational offices, schools and agencies, as well. Throw in a church dividing controversy or two and you have the perfect conditions for missional constipation. Or what I like to call The Great Excuse.

"Woe is us," we say forlornly when we get in this state, "if only we had (fill-in-the-blank) or didn't have (fill-in-the-blank), everything would be different and we would be happy and maybe we could

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even do something that would be useful to God!” If only we had, say, monkeys. Or more money, more volunteers, more youth, a better pastor, a bigger building, fewer things to fight about and/or more people who agreed with us, a neighborhood like the old one instead of this place that feels foreign to us even though our church has been here for a hundred years, or whatever.

Well, hang on to your safari hats, sisters and brothers. The Great Excuse is about to be met by The Great Surprise.

Easter is now

On Easter Sunday you’ll wake up, sneak a jelly bean or two from your kid’s basket, put on nicer clothes than you usually wear to church, leave the house early in order to get a parking spot, wiggle your way into a fuller than usual pew, and glance at the picture on the front cover of your bulletin. It’s Jesus standing outside the empty tomb. Or it’s the angels telling the women, who think they’ve come to anoint a dead body, that their job description has changed. Anyway, the picture seems to be telling a nice story about something that happened long, long ago. But then the music will start. And the pastor will shout, “Christ is risen!” And you’ll shout back, “Christ is risen, indeed!”

Surprise.

Easter isn’t just a great story about something that happened to Jesus and his friends in ancient days. It isn’t even just a wonderful promise about something that

will happen to you and your loved ones one day. Easter is way more than a past or future tense story. Easter is now. Christ is risen. Jesus is alive. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is on the loose in our world...and in our lives.

A new kind of question

Right now, in the places where you work, worship, and play, God is doing what God has always done. God is bringing light out of darkness and life out of death,

In several congregations I know about, leaders are helping people learn to pay attention to what the risen Christ is up to by giving them an opportunity to tell their stories to each other. Instead of a quick handshake during the “Sharing of the Peace” or giving a one-directional sermon, worship leaders are asking people to turn to the person sitting behind or in front of them and share:

- How has God’s mission of love, reconciliation and freedom come to you lately?
- And how has it come through you, making a difference in somebody else’s life, lately?

In other words, Christ is risen, huh? Well, then, tell me about what that looks like in your world and how you have been a part of it. – Kelly Fryer

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healing communities and reconciling us to each other, feeding the hungry in body and soul, making peace between enemies and justice roll down like water, setting people free. And, just like always, God is working in and through people to do these things.

The reality of a God who is at work in the world today changes the whole conversation. Or, at the very least, it changes the questions. Instead of having panicky pow-wows around “What do we need that we don’t have and how can we get it?” or “What do we have to do to survive?!” or “What happens if we lose everything?!” we are set free to boldly and purposefully ask questions like this one:

What in the world is God up to
–right here and right now–
and how can we help?

Do what matters

You’ll get no argument from me. We are living through challenging times. We are, most likely, going to have to figure out a whole new way of being and doing church together. We might even have to figure out a new way of doing life. But we cannot allow ourselves to be demoralized by scarcity, consumed by self-pity, cornered into self-absorption, or paralyzed by fear. Christ is risen! Indeed, the kingdom of God is among you (Lk. 17:21).

There are no more excuses.

Keep your eyes open. Learn to pay attention to the things Christ is doing in, through, and all around you. When you see things that are making God smile, jump in and help. When you see something that is breaking God’s heart, use what you have and who you are to do something about it. Wherever you see God at work, jump on board, join in, and be a part of it.

Do what matters. Now.

Kelly A. Fryer is a managing partner at A Renewal Enterprise, Inc., a consulting firm that helps people and the organizations they care about be who they are and see what they have for the sake of doing what matters. She is the author of several books including “Reclaiming the E Word: Waking Up To Our Evangelical Identity” (2008) and “The Future Starts Now” (2009).

This article was originally published in The Lutheran magazine, April 2010.

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