

The Time Machine

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

If you were alive forty years ago today, chances are that if you turned on the radio, you had a good chance of hearing a song that would be the #3 song in the nation by next month, a song by a musical group from Detroit, Michigan called The Chairmen of the Board called "Give Me Just a Little More Time." The song is a plea from one lover to another to not end their relationship, because, in the words of the song, *"Give me just a little more time, and our love will surely grow. Love is that mountain we must climb, let's climb it together your hand in mine, we haven't known each other too long, but the feeling I have is oh so strong, I know we can make it, there's no doubt, we owe it to ourselves to find it out, just give me just a little more time."*

This morning, I would like to tell you the story of Ron Mallett, whose life I became familiar with by way of episode #324 of a National Public Radio Program called *This American Life*; a man whose life has largely been about the search for a little more time.

Ron grew up in the Bronx, the son of an electrician named Boyd Mallett, whom he idolized. He describes his childhood as being filled with days that did not begin until his father came home from work. Each day Ron would walk to the subway station to meet his father coming home from work and carry his tools for him.

Boyd used to teach electronics to his son in the family home, and Ron believed there was nothing his dad could not do, and for good reason. Boyd was always wiring things; he wired the family's electric train to run by voice command. When the family had a party, he wired the commode seat to play music whenever someone lifted the lid. But on the night of the eleventh wedding anniversary of Ron's parents, Ron was awakened in the middle of the night to the sound of his mother crying. Boyd had just suffered a massive heart attack, and had died at the age of thirty-three.

Today, Ron says his father was the center of his universe, so much so that if his dad had offered to let him die with him, he gladly would have gone.

After his father's death, Ron stopped caring about school or having friends. Yet one day, Ron came upon an edition of a comic book called *Classics Illustrated* that was a graphic novel of H.G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine*. Ron describes finding this book as one of the two defining moments of his life, the other being his father's death. As an eleven-year-old, he went alone and saw the movie version of *The Time Machine* five times. He read H.G. Wells' original version of the book. Every day after school, using his father's tools and working in secret, Ron began to design build his own time machine, believing that if he could only go back in time and warn his father to get his heart checked, he could have his dad back again.

Give me just a little more time.

He read Einstein, or at least tried to. Because everyone knew Einstein was a genius, and because Einstein believed time travel was possible, Ron did, too. He spent all his lunch money on science paperbacks until he became thin and anemic, and his mother began packing his lunch. His secret obsession with building a time machine continued through his teens and into adulthood. He joined the Air Force so he could go to college on the G.I. Bill. He eventually earned

a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, and a Ph.D. from Penn State University, and he has taught at the University of Connecticut since 1975, specializing in particle and field theory.

Still, for most of his life, working in secret, he continued to work to create his time machine. Even as a man who was older than his father was when his father died, he still held onto his dream: he would go back in time, go to the old house in the Bronx, find his father, convince him that the man standing before him was his son, show him family photos with his father missing from them, and then tell his dad to get his heart checked, so that he would not die so young.

Give me just a little more time.

His obsession caused bouts with depression. It cost him a marriage. He abandoned the project for a while, but when he had heart problems of his own and took a break from his professorial duties, he used his time of recuperation to revive the project, sometimes working on equations with paper and pencil for fifteen hours a day. *New Scientist* magazine published a cover story on Ron's work, which allowed him to talk openly about his research and findings. He was invited to speak at a physics conference, where he was told by the esteemed researcher and Einstein contemporary Dr. Bryce Dewitt, who was speaking before the gathered body of scientists, "I do not know if you will see your father again, but I do know that he would be proud of you."

And with those words, Dr. Ron Mallett, this man who, out of pure love for his father, who had invested thousands of hours, relationships, and literally decades of his life, going to such great lengths for love, finally found his peace.

In this morning's text, Jesus is resurrected from the dead. He wasn't asleep or near death. He was dead. For those of us who celebrate Easter each year and the resurrection each Sunday, it is easy to forget that for those who experienced this story the first time, the resurrection of Christ wasn't something that was merely a turn of the page away. As the tomb was sealed, no one thought, "Wow! Only three days to wait. I don't know if I can make it!" In ancient Israel, tombs were used only for a year, until the body was only bones, which were collected and placed in a special box called an ossuary. The death of Christ on Good Friday was death as you and I have experienced the death of those we know and love; death in all of its finality and permanence.

Which is why this day is such a day of rejoicing! Which is why we are here today. As different as we all are, death, like birth, is one thing we all have in common. The biblical

narrative is full of death; adults die, children die, armies die, nations die. The psalmists write songs about death, the prophets warn of impending death, Jesus talks about his own death.

There is so much talk and experience of death in the biblical witness, but on this day, early in the morning on the first day of the week, in the shadow of a brutal and unjust death, God gets to give God's word, God's perspective, God's dream, and God's reality, when it comes to this matter of death.

At the very beginning of the gospel of John, we learn that Jesus is God's word made flesh, that in the beginning, Jesus was with God, and since the beginning, Jesus has been and *is* God. And in that event when God becomes human in the form of God's infant son Jesus, in a stable in Bethlehem, in that moment that Christians call the Incarnation, the God who stands outside of time, the God who created time itself, enters into *our* time. God, like us, lives with a body that ages, that breaks, that dies.

Yet in the resurrection, we learn that the God who in Jesus Christ has entered *our time* with all of its finality, in rising from the dead, and making the promise of eternal life to us, removes you and I and the people we love from the limitations of human space and time, promising us that we too shall not be held prisoner to time, but that we shall indeed live forever. This is why we are here today. This is why we gather together to celebrate the resurrection each Sunday, because in it we have the promise from God that we are already living on God's time, because in God, our lives will never end.

What I find to irresistibly endearing about the life of Dr. Mallett is how the comic book, which led to the little grieving boy using his father's tools to try to build a time machine, which led to service in the United States Air Force, which led to the earning of three degrees and a distinguished teaching award from Penn State, which led to a career teaching at the University of Connecticut and more research and more honors, all of that deep knowledge of mathematics and physics, all of that painful sacrifice, the *obsession* of it all, was borne out of love. This boy and then this man went to *such great lengths* for love that he sought to bend the rules of space and time, just to see his father again, to give him just a little more time.

Sisters and brothers, you are God's singular obsession. And all of it; the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ through the pregnancy of an unwed teenage girl, through all of the doubting, the scorn, the slander, the abandonment, the torture, and even the death, all of it, are in the same way are the *such great lengths* to which God is willing to go, so that you and I can see the Father,

so that you and I might not be prisoners of time, but that we, with one another and with God might live forever.

The answer to death is not a time machine, an invention that allows us to move through the dimension of time as we can move through the dimension of space. The answer to death, God's answer to death, is to conquer the limitations of time itself by conquering death, time's oldest foe.

There is no length to which God will not go, including to death itself, so that you and I can live forever, and God never gives up on us either, as long as there is time. This is why we gather. This is why we rejoice. This is why we sing "Alleluia," because in the God of the resurrection, the God who has conquered death, has given you and I, and all who believe, the gift of eternal, joyful, unending, everlasting, time.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.