

# *Impossible before Breakfast*

John 21:1-19

## Introduction

Tim Burton's film version of *Alice in Wonderland*—starring Johnny Depp as the Mad Hatter—made its appearance in movie theaters on March 5 of this year. It is so delightfully fantastical that it is impossible for any rational person to believe any of it. But Alice Kingsley, played by Mia Wasikowska, declares, *Sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast*. At the end of the movie, as she is about to slay the Jabberwocky, she reiterates her sentiment: *I believe in as many as six impossible things before breakfast. Count them, Alice*, she whispers to herself. *One, there are drinks that make you shrink. Two, there are foods that make you grow. Three, animals can talk. Four, cats can grin. Five, there is a place called Underland. Six, I can slay a Jabberwocky.*

The movie sent me back to Lewis Carroll's original books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*. In those pages, it was actually the White Queen who made the declaration to Alice about believing impossible things before breakfast. The encounter occurred something like this:

When it was getting as dark as it can...and darker, Alice caught the black shawl of the White Queen as the shawl came hurtling through the air, driven by a fierce wind, into the woods where Alice was hiding. Directly behind it came the White Queen running wildly with both arms stretched out wide, as though she were flying, and Alice very civilly went to meet her with the shawl. After a lengthy conversation on numerous topics, the Queen asked Alice:

"How old are you?"

"I'm seven and a half, exactly," replied Alice.

"You needn't say 'exactly,'" the Queen remarked. "I can believe it without that. Now I'll give you something to believe. I'm just one hundred and one, five months and a day."

"I can't believe *that!*" said Alice.

"Can't you?" the Queen said in a pitying tone. "Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes."

Alice laughed. "There's no use trying," she said: "one *can't* believe impossible things."

"I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."<sup>1</sup>

## Impossible Before the Encounter

Under a thick gray cloud, Jesus' disciples went fishing. More accurately, under the long extended shadow of the cross, about which they were still despondent, seven disciples went fishing. The dark night of the soul had set in for all the disciples. This was not an hour of power for them, nor could these moments be characterized as the zenith of their faith. While there had been rumors that the tomb where Jesus lay appeared to be empty, the body perhaps stolen, these rumors no doubt composed—as we said last week—nothing more than an idle tale: an idle tale in a perpetual night of doubt and despair.

Women had gone to the tomb at the dawn of the third day of Jesus' burial, but there was no dawn in their lives. Their hopes were dashed, their dreams dissipated, their aspirations defeated, their little company of Jesus' followers dispersed. They came not to watch the light of dawn rise out of darkness—the sign of a new day—but, rather, to embalm the entombed, a sign of finality. The disciples didn't go at all, with the exception of Peter and John, who saw only the empty tomb and no angels in white. The One whom they had thought to be the messiah had been crucified and had left their expectations emaciated and emasculated. The disciples were in the darkest day of *the winter of their discontent*.<sup>ii</sup> The immortal longings they had experienced in the transcending presence of Jesus of Nazareth were now finite and futile.

At this juncture, in the travesty of the cross, there were at least six things which were impossible for them to believe. Count them, we say:

One, impossible to believe that the disciples would ever see Jesus again. Two, impossible to believe that Jesus was after all the King of the Jews, to say nothing of the Lord of Life. Three, impossible to believe that the Roman Empire is not, after all, the supreme authority and tyrannical power in all the world. Render everything to Caesar now, for Christ is dead. Four, impossible to believe that prayer actually accomplishes anything of value. Five, impossible to believe that Jesus' three years of ministry—his teachings, parables and miracles—had any indelible impact for good on a suffering world. Six, impossible to believe that death is not the end of it all. This business of “I go to prepare a place for you . . .” must have been only words and nothing more. “I go to prepare a place for you,” their Master had said, “and will come again that where I am you may be also!” No! Impossible! Jesus is dead, that's the end of the affair!

The White Queen may have been able to believe six impossible things before breakfast, but for the disciples—now fishing in a boat—it was impossible to believe anything anymore! In essence now, it is impossible to believe that there is any ultimate purpose to life, that there is any meaning to human existence.

“I am going fishing,” announces Simon Peter to the other disciples, and the others join him, returning to the only thing they know for certain. For the despondent disciples, everything else is ethereal, like a vapor which vanishes in the sun. Fishing on the Sea of Galilee is where they feel in control! They retreat to the only familiarity that can provide a small comfort, a modicum of sense in a sea of senselessness. Death has taken over all their hopes and dreams! There is no meaning or purpose to life with a buried Master or a decomposing Savior. Impossible to believe! . . . .  
until after breakfast.

A non-descript, unrecognizable figure appears on the beach at break of day. He shouts to the men in the boat, “Have you any fish?”

“No,” they shout back. Undoubtedly it is a shout that lacks heart. Why would they care to answer, anyway? Could it be possible that this inquisitive stranger, standing on the edge of the sea, standing on the edge of their abyss, has not yet heard that *God is dead!* That *God is dead,*

*and that God remains dead,* <sup>iii</sup> and that they—the disciples— had been duped by a Master of Gentleness, powerless against an empire of amassed ruthlessness and wanton cruelty!

“Cast your net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some,” the stranger calls out in a kindly rejoinder. They do, and the catch is enormous. “It is the Lord,” said the beloved disciple John to the impulsive disciple Peter, who springs into the sea and swims to shore. A charcoal fire awaits the seven disciples, and Jesus invites them as he had invited all the world to him on every conceivable occasion of love: “Come and have breakfast.” No one asks, “Who are you?” for they know it is the Lord. They encounter the Risen Christ at breakfast. And in that very moment, everything that has been impossible to believe before breakfast becomes absolutely believable after breakfast.

### **Nothing Impossible After the Encounter**

You and I meet the Risen Christ in the most unexpected places and in the most unexpected moments: in our marriages, in our friendships, in the marketplace, in the workplace, in the food lines of the shelters, in the poverty of the poor and in the cries of the lonely and in the labored breathing of the dying and in the terror of the traumatized and in the kindness of the healer and in the generosity of the neighbor and in the compassion of the stranger.

Through them all we meet the Master. There seems to be endless evidence that we as people of faith have convictional experiences in which God encounters us and by which God reorders our lives.

*In fact, God is the one who encounters us and makes us believers.*

*As believers we speak of the One whom we have met, whom we know, and whom we love, worship, and serve. ...That encounter with God—as the Risen Christ—leads to adoration of God, which in turn leads to reflection on faith...God clearly does not relate to everyone in the same way. God meets us, as we need to be met.* <sup>iv</sup>

It is a matter of record that God met Mary Magdalene in the Garden near the tomb, where she needed to be met in her dejection. It is a matter of record that God met the disciples in the upper room behind locked doors, where they needed to be met in their fear. Here it is a matter of record that God meets the seven despondent disciples who went fishing on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius, over breakfast, where they needed to be met in their retrenchment. *To think that Christian faith is ultimately about how faithful Christians are to Christ rather than how faithful Christ is to Christians is a serious misunderstanding.* <sup>v</sup> Because Christ is faithful, he appears to the disciples by the Sea of Galilee, to demonstrate his faithfulness and to elicit their faithfulness in return.

“Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?”

Peter responds, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

“Feed my lambs.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter responds, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.”

“Tend my sheep.”

“Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Grieved, Peter responds, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.”

“Feed my sheep.”

*Because God is faithful, God encounters us and is involved in disordering and reordering our lives. That’s it! That’s it, exactly.... and I need to say exactly so that you and I, unlike the White Queen, will believe it! That’s it, exactly! By the cross of Jesus the Crucified Christ, God had disordered the disciples’ lives...shattered them completely. Now, in the encounter with Jesus the Risen Christ, over breakfast, God reordered their lives.... pulled together all the broken pieces...so that in that breakfast encounter it became possible to believe everything they had believed before, and this time with absolute certainty!*

### **Conclusion**

As the disciples and you and I sit on the beach at breakfast with the Risen Christ, it becomes clear to us that Jesus is more than the object of our faith, more than the ground of all being, more than a person or event or community. He is a place to be, a standpoint, and that place to be is alongside the neighbor, being for him or her, being alongside the neighbor, feeding the sheep of the Risen Christ.<sup>vi</sup>

As we stand and look back on the story of salvation we have just cycled through again this year, we could argue that the cross ought to be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church. We may wish to recover the claim that Jesus was not crucified in a cathedral between two candles but on a cross between two thieves; on a town garbage heap; at a crossroad of politics so cosmopolitan that they had to write His title in Hebrew and in Latin and in Greek . . .and at that kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse and soldiers gamble. Because that is where he died, and that was from where he was raised; and since that is what he died about, and that is what he was raised for, then that is where the Risen Christ’s people ought to be and what we ought to be about: living alongside hurting neighbors of a broken world, feeding His sheep.<sup>vii</sup>

Impossible? Maybe, but sometimes I can believe as many as six impossible things . . . after breakfast with the Risen Christ. For *I can do all things through him (Christ) who strengthens me.*<sup>viii</sup>

What about you?

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*Notes*

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- <sup>i</sup> Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter V
- <sup>ii</sup> Adapted phrase from Shakespeare's *King Richard III*
- <sup>iii</sup> This section is inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Prologue, chapter 2, which reads as follows: *When Zarathustra was alone . . . he said to his heart: "Could it be possible! This old saint in the forest hath not yet heard of it, that God is dead!"* and from *The Gay Science*, chapter 125: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him . . ."
- <sup>iv</sup> From Charles Partee and Andrew Purves' book, *Encountering God: Christian Faith in Turbulent Times*:
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>vi</sup> Adapted from William Hamilton, *Thursday's Child*
- <sup>vii</sup> This paragraph is an adaptation of a Lenten Reflection I came across in the late 1980's.
- <sup>viii</sup> Philippians 4:13