

The Butterfly Effect

Luke 24:1-12

Wayne Eberly

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You might have heard of the butterfly effect. The butterfly effect refers to a concept that small causes have large effects. A tiny change in one place can have a huge impact at a different and even distant time and location, so much so that a butterfly flapping its wings might influence events at a later time and place on the other end of the world. I guess I would have to say I believe in the butterfly effect. I believe one small action in one time and place can have an impact that is felt far and wide.

The creation story found in the book of Genesis tells of a man and woman in a garden called Eden, a garden where everything was perfect. They had all they needed not just to survive, but to thrive. The Lord God dwelt with them, walking with them in the cool of the evening. How would you describe the garden? Just read about God's creation in Genesis one and you'll understand this was good. Life was good. It was very good. And then one little tiny butterfly flapped its wings. In this good and gorgeous garden one teeny weeny butterfly flapped its wings, and the chaos caused altered the course of human history.

God had filled the garden with all kinds of trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. And he put one tree in the middle of the garden, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. That one tree, just that one tree, of that tree alone God commanded, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." So it was that one day this seemingly innocent butterfly lighted on the woman and said, "Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Flap, flap, flap, probably so quiet you couldn't even make out the sound, so soft and gentle you wouldn't even feel any flutter in the breeze, just the smallest flap, flap, flap, and the butterfly effect was set in motion.

Now the Bible doesn't mention a butterfly in the Garden of Eden, and that's okay. In Genesis we are told it was a serpent. The bible doesn't say the serpent was the devil, but from everything we know about the devil, that he is the father of lies, I'm putting my money on the serpent being Satan, in one form or another. And because that one little question, really nothing more than a flap of a butterfly's wings has caused such far reaching and disastrous consequences, for today I'm calling that serpent a butterfly. "Did God really say...." In this case, instead of a long and protracted distance between the cause and effect the effect is felt immediately. The woman ate from the tree, gave some fruit to her husband, and the next thing you know they have grabbed a bunch of leaves and covered their nakedness. They can cover their nakedness. What they can't cover is their guilt. The man blames the woman, the woman blames the butterfly, and the butterfly floats away, surveying the disaster he has caused, smiling a very sinister smile as if to say, "That was easy."

It's not just that a few flaps of that butterfly's wings caused the man and woman to stumble and fall, the effect multiplied. Their son Cain rose up against his brother Abel and put him to death, an ancestor not far down the family tree was spewing threats that he would avenge himself 70 times on his enemies, and soon Noah is building an ark because God was ready to give up on the whole lot of human beings. Flap, flap, flap, a few choice words, and God's good creation has gone to hell in a hand basket. "Did God really say?"

You have to give the devil credit. If all it takes is a few flaps of a butterfly's wings, why not keep flapping. How many times in the life of Israel did that old butterfly show up and ask, "Did God really say..."

- you shall make no idols
- you shall not murder
- you shall not commit adultery
- you shall not steal

You wouldn't believe how effective the butterfly effect is. The history of Israel is one of idolatry and adultery, of greed and coveting and murder. The history of Israel is one of crisis and chaos. And time and time again the butterfly floats away, surveying the disaster he has caused, and smiling a sinister smile as he says, "That was easy."

One day the devil saw a new target. He saw Jesus rising out of the waters of baptism and something that looked like a dove landing on him. And there was a voice from heaven, the voice of God the Father saying to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love, with you I am well pleased." Jesus had his dove, the Holy Spirit, and Satan had his butterfly, just ready to flap his wings and cause more death and destruction. Satan came up to Jesus and flapped his wings. "Did God really say you are his Son? Then turn these stones into bread." But something happened that stymied the butterfly effect. Something happened that stopped it cold in its tracks. Jesus replied, "God really did say that man does not live by bread alone." Satan tried again. "Did God really say you are his Son? If you will worship me I will give you all the kingdoms of the world." Flap, flap, flap...let's see how this plays out. But again Jesus replied, "God really did say worship the Lord your God and serve him only." By this point Satan is flapping his wings so hard he looks more like a hummingbird than a butterfly, and he launches one more offensive. "Did God really say you are his Son? Then throw yourself down from the highest point of the temple and let God's angels rescue you." Jesus stands firm. "God really did say not to put him to the test." With a frustrated flap of his wings the devil beat a hasty retreat, leaving Jesus alone. While we rejoice at the departure of that tempting butterfly, it is an ominous parting. We are told Satan left Jesus alone until an opportune time.

It must have drove the devil crazy to be using his old strategy of flapping his butterfly wings and to see no effect as Jesus came preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God, as Jesus demonstrated the goodness and grace of the kingdom of God through healings and miracles and through showing kindness and concern and compassion for the weak, the vulnerable, the outsiders. It must have drove the devil crazy to see that Jesus had his own butterfly effect.

This butterfly effect is when new life comes in all of its beauty and brightness. In Christ Jesus there was new creation, and lepers were made clean and the blind had sight, the deaf could hear and the lame leaped for joy. And it was more than physical change. Fishermen and tax collectors now found meaning and purpose in following Jesus Christ and being his disciples. There were sinners and outcasts who found forgiveness and a place of belonging. Oh, the butterfly effect Jesus brought was the complete opposite of the devil with his destruction and devastation. Jesus brought joy and peace and hope and laughter and life and celebration and thanksgiving. And most of all Jesus brought love.

And yet even all of this new creation taking place in the lives of people, this butterfly effect, even as wonderful as it was, it did not capture the full purpose of why Jesus had come. Jesus came to undo the butterfly effect that had been set in motion by Satan with his sly question, “Did God really say...” Jesus came to undo all the rebellion, all the brokenness, all the sinfulness, all the death, and all the destruction. So Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem. And Satan stayed close at hand, waiting for that opportune time.

He found it. Satan found that opportune time to tempt Jesus. Satan found that opportune time to test Jesus. Like that first time in Genesis it was in a garden. This time it was the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus finished the Last Supper he would share with his disciples and he went out to pray in the garden. Right then this little butterfly came by, came right up to him, and he was up to his old tricks. Did God really say you must suffer? Did God really say you must die? Oh, that butterfly was tempting him to choose another path, to call down angels from heaven, to assert his power and privilege as God’s Beloved Son. There in the Garden of Gethsemane Satan was tempting Jesus by saying, “Did God really say....” There in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” Oh, those butterfly wings picked up speed and intensity. Here it comes. He is going to let that cup pass and take the easy way out. “Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me.” And then Jesus finished his prayer. “Yet not my will, but yours be done.” Fzzzzz. Satan’s butterfly wings lost their zip and ground to a halt.

So it must have been a pleasant surprise for Satan when Jesus did suffer and die. Satan must have loved it when Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried. Satan must have loved it, knowing that he could come to the tomb and watch the disciples of Jesus weep and moan and wail in misery. Satan must have been waiting eagerly to sit like a butterfly on the stone at the tomb and mock God's Son. As Jesus lay dead in the tomb that sinister butterfly was practicing the lines he would use to mock the brokenhearted followers of Jesus.

- Did God really say, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he sent me to preach good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor?" Did God really say, "Today that scripture is fulfilled"? Well, how fulfilled does it look to you now, as Jesus is dead in the tomb.
- Did God really say, "Tell what you have seen and heard. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." Yeah, how is that working for you now, Jesus?
- Did God really say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...blessed are the merciful...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the peacemakers...." Did God really say they will inherit the earth? Did God really say theirs is the kingdom of heaven? Did God really say they will be called the children of God? Here is your inheritance, here is your kingdom, here is your playground you children of God. A tomb. A tomb where your savior lies dead and stripped of all power.
- Did God really say, "I am the Good Shepherd, and the Good Shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." Don't you wish he could do more than lay down his life. Don't you wish he was alive?

- Did God really say, “Greater love has no man than this; that he lay down his life for his friends?” Mission accomplished. Jesus is dead.
- Did God really say, “I am the resurrection and the life?”

With that sinister smile the butterfly is flapping his wings, waiting for the butterfly effect to send out its ripples and waves of destruction and despair and hopelessness and misery. But while that wicked butterfly was flapping his wings a more powerful force exerted itself. The butterfly wings of the devil create death and despair. On that Easter morning another force exerted itself, and it was the resurrection power of God. On that morning the stone was rolled away from the tomb. On that morning death was defeated, sin was conquered, and a new butterfly effect was set in motion. All of the life and the purpose and the power and the beauty and the hope that Jesus had brought received God’s almighty and eternal stamp of approval. Jesus was raised from the dead.

Satan was flapping his wings and flapping his lips, taunting and teasing with his old routine, “Did God really say...Did God really say...Did God really say...” And the angels shouted it out! Yes, God really did say! And the women who were weeping, and the disciples who cowered in fear, and the whole train of people who had been touched and healed and forgiven and loved by Jesus raised their voices together in a chorus of praise, “Yes, God really did say all of these things.” And now we know they are true. He is risen from the dead.

Have you felt the butterfly effect of the resurrection? Have you felt the effect of that resurrection day? Have you felt the effect of Jesus rising victorious from the tomb? It is an effect that was felt immediately by all those present. It is an effect that is felt eternally, for his victory was a heavenly victory over all the dominion of darkness. And it is an effect that is felt continually. Even now, even today, that butterfly effect, the effect of God conquering sin and death, the effect of Jesus Christ being alive and being Lord of all creation, that effect brings healing and hope. That effect brings forgiveness and reconciliation. That effect brings new creation and new life.

This past Tuesday we woke up to the horrible news of the bombings in Brussels. Satan's butterfly effect is still in effect. We know one day it will completely lose its steam, but now it still works itself out in hatred and destruction. And it is so easy to hear that voice whispering in our ears, "Did God really say love your enemies? Did God really say, 'Blessed are the peacemakers?' Did God really say forgive seventy times seven?" That butterfly effect is still very effective, and those whispers of "Did God really say" go to work in our hearts and minds.

Right after I heard about the bombings I saw a note from a friend of ours who is a missionary. His name is Mark. In 1992 Julie was going with a group from our church in Fresno, California to Albania, a country that has been under the crushing rule of communism for many years. They were finally allowing Christians in the country, and Julie and a few others were heading up a team on a short-term mission. Somehow Julie felt God nudging her to call and invite Mark, who was in his late twenties. We barely knew Mark from a few summer camp experiences. But God nudged Julie to invite Mark, she invited him, he immediately agreed, participated on that trip, and within a short period of time had accepted a full-time missionary position in Albania. This all started in 1992 and now Mark and his wife Ruth and their children live and work and serve our Lord Jesus Christ in Albania. Right after we received news of the bombings in Brussels a note appeared with some pictures. Mark wrote, "We took eight of our Bible School students to the Greece-Macedonia refugee camp yesterday, a four hour drive. The students will stay a week. Most of those we met have been living in small tents for a month. Sad...yet there is much hope." Eight students from a country that once had just a handful of Christians because of the oppressive regime of communism, eight students are going to work with refugees. They are going to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ to ones in desperate need. Did God really say, "Blessed are the peacemakers?" The tomb is empty, Christ is alive, and yes, yes, yes, God really did say all of those messages of life through his Son Jesus. There is a butterfly effect in effect, and I'm in the camp that firmly believes what Jesus said and what Jesus did is what will last for eternity.

Have you felt the butterfly effect of the resurrection? Our youth group from Houston attended a retreat. The retreat was with other youth groups, some 200 youth. On that retreat, a girl got up to give her testimony. She was a high school student. It turned out her mom had died recently. With tears she told of how alone she felt. And then she told how God had come to her and comforted her. As she was telling her story a butterfly flew into the room. I have talked a lot about butterflies today, but I haven't really talked about how beautiful a butterfly is. A butterfly really is an awesome part of God's creation, with those spreading wings and bright colors. Imagine a young girl who has lost her mother talking to a group of her peers and saying somehow, someway, in God's goodness and grace she had found comfort. And as she is speaking of God's comfort and care, this butterfly is circling around the room. While all the other kids were listening intently to the girl they were also watching the butterfly. Slowly the butterfly made its way to where the girl was talking. Then it landed on her. And it stayed. The butterfly is a symbol of resurrection. From what I heard, everybody who left that meeting place that day left in reverent quiet. The butterfly effect of Jesus Christ, the one who is risen from the dead, brought a group of students to a holy silence, to a sacred moment, to a worshipful awe, and to a reverent rejoicing.

I believe the butterfly effect is still in effect. It is in effect as students travel to refugee camps and it is in effect when a young girl testifies to the presence and the power of God in a time of loss. I believe the butterfly effect is in effect here, right here, right here and right now. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. And the effect of his resurrection will never end. He is the resurrection and he is the life. Jesus Christ is risen from the dead! He is risen indeed!