

Is this the greatest Easter painting of all time?



It has the imposing title, ***The Disciples Peter and John Running to the Sepulchre on the Morning of the Resurrection.***

More often than not it's just referred to by the shortened form, ***The Disciples or Les Disciples.***

You won't find it in the Louvre or the Met or the National Gallery. It hangs tucked away in an old railway station in Paris, now the Musée d'Orsay, on the left bank of the Seine.

It was painted in 1898 by a relatively little known Swiss artist named Eugène Burnand. He was something of an old-fashioned realist at a time when all the cool kids were embracing modernism. *The Disciples* didn't make a splash when it was first hung. Burnand's style was already considered passé by the 1890s.

But those who take the time to find it in the d'Orsay come away saying that viewing the canvas is akin to a spiritual experience. Some say it is the greatest Easter painting ever made.

Scroll up and look again at the picture.

As the first blush of dawn is tinting the clouds, Peter and John are rushing to the tomb of Christ. They've just been told by Mary Magdalene that she and the other women found it empty, that Christ has risen.

Her words are ringing in their ears. But their faces and their bodies reveal they aren't sure they can believe her.

John, the younger of the two, wrings his hands together anxiously. He was with Jesus when he died on the cross, the only disciple to stay by his side to the end. He looks as if he can barely bring himself to believe that Christ might be alive again.



And then there's Peter. While John was Jesus' only faithful disciple, Peter was his most faithless. He was the only one to verbally deny even knowing Jesus in his darkest hour. In this picture Peter looks terrified, hopeful, ashamed, desperate. He's not sure whether he can believe the reports. But he wants to. Oh, how he *wants to*.

How did Burnand capture such a variety of emotions in that one face? Peter's hand grasps his chest, as if feeling for courage, the courage that deserted him just nights earlier.

They both lean forward, walking briskly, readying themselves to break into a run.

The picture crackles with kinetic energy. It is a study in desperate anticipation. Surely this is also the posture with which we should

approach Easter. Leaning in, wringing our hands, clutching our chests, desperate for it to be true.

Isn't that what Lent is about? Haven't we been bearing the burden of our brokenness, ashamed of our denials of Christ, and hoping against all hope that Jesus is alive? And that he loves us? And forgives us?

Burnand depicts no women, no tomb, no gardener. Only the promise of what's to come.

That's our experience of Resurrection too, isn't it? We take it by faith and we're desperate for it to be true. We rush headlong into the future, holding ourselves in order to believe, trusting that Christ is alive and that he will return to vindicate our feeble faith and forgive us our trespasses.

May this overlooked masterpiece be a comfort to you this Easter. And may your faith increase and your brokenness be healed. And may your eyes be filled with the same desperate hope that Peter's and John's were on that first Easter morning.

by Michael Frost