

Acts 1:1-9

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. 'This', he said, 'is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now.'

So when they had come together, they asked him, 'Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?' He replied, 'It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.' When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight.

Acts 1:12-14

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

Acts 1:21-26

So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.' So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, 'Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.' And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

Ode to Billy Joe - lyrics copyright Bobbie Gentry

It was the third of June, another sleepy, dusty Delta day
I was out choppin' cotton and my brother was balin' hay
And at dinner time we stopped and walked back to the house to eat
And Mama hollered out the back door "y'all remember to wipe your feet"
And then she said "I got some news this mornin' from Choctaw Ridge"
"Today Billy Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

And Papa said to Mama as he passed around the blackeyed peas
"Well, Billy Joe never had a lick of sense, pass the biscuits, please"

There's five more acres in the lower forty I've got to plow"
And Mama said it was shame about Billy Joe, anyhow
Seems like nothin' ever comes to no good up on Choctaw Ridge
And now Billy Joe MacAllister's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge

And Brother said he recollected when he and Tom and Billie Joe
Put a frog down my back at the Carroll County picture show
And wasn't I talkin' to him after church last Sunday night?
"I'll have another piece of apple pie, you know it don't seem right
I saw him at the sawmill yesterday on Choctaw Ridge
And now you tell me Billy Joe's jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

And Mama said to me "Child, what's happened to your appetite?
I've been cookin' all morning and you haven't touched a single bite
That nice young preacher, Brother Taylor, dropped by today
Said he'd be pleased to have dinner on Sunday, oh, by the way
He said he saw a girl that looked a lot like you up on Choctaw Ridge
And she and Billy Joe was throwing somethin' off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

A year has come 'n' gone since we heard the news 'bout Billy Joe
And Brother married Becky Thompson, they bought a store in Tupelo
There was a virus going 'round, Papa caught it and he died last Spring
And now Mama doesn't seem to wanna do much of anything
And me, I spend a lot of time pickin' flowers up on Choctaw Ridge
And drop them into the muddy water off the Tallahatchie Bridge

Cold Case #1005: Billy Joe MacAllister
Rev. David Dalke
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The year is 1967. The day is June 3. The place is Choctaw Ridge in Carroll County, Mississippi. It's the place that Billy Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge. We really don't know why he did that. He must have had so much pain that he just couldn't stand life any more. But somebody must have an answer. Somebody must know something about why he jumped. I don't know, maybe our storyteller knows. Well, it's lunchtime, and our storyteller has been out in the fields with her brother. They go out there and they pick cotton and bale hay every morning. And Mama comes to the door, and she shouts out the door, "Y'all remember, wipe your feet." They come in, and they're all sitting at the table. They're passing all the food around, and all of a sudden, Mama says, "I got some news this mornin' from Choctaw Ridge. Today Billy Joe MacAllister jumped off the Tallahatchie Bridge"

It's a cold case. It's been lying around for years, and it's just a cold, cold case. Well, you know, two thousand and ten years ago, Jesus defied death. He lived in a time when people got up really early, and they went to bed early. They worked hard. They were farmers, they were laborers, they were carpenters. As they ate early suppers and were all

gathering around and having the food that they eat regularly. Every day they would eat veggies and fruits and berries and breads and nuts and goat cheese, oh my goodness, they loved their goat cheese. And lamb. And on a special occasion they would butcher a cow. So they're eating their food, having a little conversation, and all of a sudden, if you can picture all these folks that are gathered, that have come in from the fields in Jerusalem and Galilee, around their crude old tables, all of a sudden, one of them at the table says, "Got some news today from up on Golgotha." Golgotha, the place of the skull. Golgotha, the place where Jesus died. They sit around and they talk a little more, then they get real subdued. Papa says to Mama, as he passes her the black-eyed peas, "You know that Billy Joe didn't have a lick of sense. He never had a lick of sense. Pass the biscuits, please."

You know, I suspect some of the people thought that Jesus didn't have a lick of sense. Preaching all that stuff about love, and love your neighbor, love you enemy, love those that persecute you, love those that hate you - my goodness, can you imagine that? And preaching all that forgiveness stuff. Yeah, they probably thought he didn't have a lick of sense. Then he goes to a cross, and he dies. He dies for what he believes in.

You know, my friends, when you have a cold case, you have to go back and revisit the place where the even happened. You've got to go and take a look at all the place, the people, you've got to go back there. It's cold, you don't know what's going to be there and so we can go back to the Tallahatchie Bridge, but the Tallahatchie Bridge collapse in 1972. So we can't do that. We could go to Golgotha, my goodness, let's go to Golgotha, the place of the skull. But you know what? You go there and historians tell us, "There's Golgotha, right over there. There's the hill where Jesus climbed." And then someone else says, "No, it was over there." "No, I think it was over there." Just like the tomb. You know that tomb where Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body after he died. "Yeah, it must be over here. This is the tomb in the garden, isn't it?" Well, no, it's not. It's over here. So that's not much help. That's not much help.

The cold case. A cold case is tough, because we've got to know what all happened. We've got to know what happened, need to talk to the people. Yeah, let's talk to the folks. Well, we can go talk to our storyteller's papa, but you know what? He died a year after Billy Joe jumped off the Tallahatchie bridge. I don't think he would have been much help to us. He wouldn't have been much help, because he didn't like Billy Joe very much. Remember, he said he didn't have a lick of sense. And besides that, Billy Joe came from the other side of the tracks, and for sure, Papa thought that he was having a relationship, a forbidden relationship, with his daughter. So I don't think he would have been much help.

And then Mama, well you know Mama was a little more sympathetic towards Billy Joe. Mama kind of liked him, but after Daddy died, Mama just withdrew, she just pulled inside, she went catatonic. We can't even talk to Mama, we can't communicate with her after all these years. And then, we've got her brother, you know the one who would always be out in the fields there, picking cotton and baling hay, we could talk to him. He knew Billy Joe. Remember, he and Tom and Billy Joe went to the Carroll County picture show, and they put a frog down her back at the show. But the brother just up and, soon as Daddy died, he married Becky Thompson and they moved to Tupelo, Mississippi. We

can't find him. So we can't talk to him. We can talk to our storyteller, now she knows a lot, I think. Because you know what, she knew Billy Joe pretty well, and they used to pick that cotton and bale that hay together. But in the middle of the morning, she'd sneak off, and she'd go up to the bridge. She'd come from her side of town, and Billy Joe would come from his side of town, the bad side, the good, side, and they'd meet at the bridge, and they'd stand there and talk and they'd lean on the railings. They'd talk about their relationship, and it might have been forbidden. And I'm sure she told him, "It's not going to work, Billy Joe, it won't work." And they'd pick flower petals and drop them off the bridge, down into the muddy waters below. She's pretty depressed about that, all these years.

And then Brother Taylor, he didn't help a bit. He was the preacher. He just didn't help a bit, because he came over the morning that they heard Billy Joe jumped off the bridge and you know what? He said, "I see Billy Joe up there every day, and I see there's somebody up there that looks a little bit like your daughter," he said. "And they're always up there throwing something off the bridge."

Then those disciples, Peter, James, John, Andrew, Judas, Simon, Jude, Thomas, you name them. Three sets of brothers, and six others, and they formed that group that walked those old dusty roads in Galilee with Jesus for three years in ministry. They walked and they talked, and I can get a picture, and I can imagine how they probably just got into it with each other. I don't think they understood a whole lot of theology in those days, they just had no idea what this Jesus' motives were, and what his miracles were all about. Can you imagine how they would just dialogue with each other, and all Jesus wanted them to do was to trust him, and have faith in him. You know, when the boat was rocking and the water was splashing and they thought they were going to drown, he just said "Come, on we're going to make it. We'll be okay." When there was not enough food for all those people, Jesus said, "Yeah, we'll feed them." He just wanted them to support him. When he went to the garden and he prayed that night because he didn't want to die, what did they do? They went to sleep and he just wanted them to support him, just to be there for him. And then he dies on a cross and what do they do? They just run off and bolt themselves behind some doors, and he wanted them just to stand tall, and stand strong. That's what he wanted.

I don't blame them a whole lot. Then there was that resurrection, and they all gathered together. Jesus appeared before them and he stayed with them for about forty days. But there was a disciple missing, remember? We read about it this morning. It was Judas, remember? He'd gone off and, Judas went and killed himself because he couldn't live with his decision he'd made to betray Jesus. So they all got together and they voted, and they cast their lots, and Matthias won, and now Matthias is one of the twelve, and now we've got twelve again, and they're going to go out and teach. They're going to go out through the land and teach everybody about God's love, and forgiveness. But we can't talk to them. They're all dead. They died by the sword, they were martyred, all of them. Cruel, cruel deaths. Peter went to Rome, remember what happened to him? He went to Rome and they said, "We're going to crucify you just like we did you Lord." And he said, "Well, you're not going to do it in the same way you did Jesus, because I refuse to die in

that same position as my Lord" and so the crucified him head downward, looking at the earth instead of looking at the sky.

I have two sons-in-law. One of them is a firefighter. He's a first responder. He's there for heart attacks. He's there for sickness, he's there for accidents, he's there for fires. He's a first responder, because he cares about people. He cares about life. He cares about people being well. He doesn't want anybody to hurt, and so he's a first responder. And then my other son-in-law works on the interior of private airplanes. He does all the stuff with the leathers and the woods, and he makes them safe inside of all these private planes, because he wants people to be safe. Well, I went to see Rich in South Carolina and his family, and my daughter and three kids.... Zachary is a ninth-grader, and he plays guitar. So Rich and Zachary and I went to the guitar store. It's just a huge old store with a lot of little rooms in it. We walked in and Rich said, "Well, David, why don't you and Zach go over in that room there or do what you want. I'm going to mosey over here." So Zachary and I went into this one room, and it wasn't very big at all. But there were guitars hanging all over the wall, and there was a fellow with his back to us, and he was strumming and strumming that guitar, and it was beautiful. The sounds were gorgeous. Zachary and I just stood there. I looked at him, and he had an old scruffy ball hat on, bent bill, and he had a rip in the back of his shirt, and his jeans were muddy, and his shoes were all cruddy-looking, and yet he was playing that guitar. It was beautiful. And he turned around and saw us, and as he did that, he said, "Oh" and I looked at him and said, "You ought to buy that guitar. You ought to buy that guitar. That is so beautiful." And then I glanced up on the wall, and there was the price tag of that guitar, and it said \$2,300. And he looked at us and said, "Yeah, it's beautiful, but buy it? Only in my dreams," he said. "Only in my dreams could I have this guitar." Then he started to play. He picked, and then he strummed a little bit, like our storyteller. Then Zachary and I started to walk out, and he said, "Fellows, it is beautiful, but only in my dreams. Only in my dreams."

So we walked out. Rich met us, and Zachary said, "Dad, I want to tell you what happened in the store, in that room." He said, "You know, there was a fellow in there," and he described him, and he said, "And he played, oh Dad, he could really play. He just loved that guitar, but it was \$2,300, Dad, it was a really expensive guitar." Finally Rich looked at us, he said, "You know, if I had \$2,300, I'd go over to that counter and I'd buy that guitar. And then I'd go back into that room, and I'd say to that fellow, "You just keep right on playing, because that guitar is yours, and it's all paid for." And then, knowing Rich, he would just quietly walk out of the store.

I really don't know what happened to Billy Joe. I don't know how much pain he had. He had to have had a lot of pain to have jumped off that bridge. But none of us can stop people from doing that. None of us can keep people from committing suicide. We just don't have the power to do that. But I suppose, in our own small way, we might have contributed to it a little bit, when we judge people who live on the other side of town, when we think some people aren't good enough for us, or they don't look like us. They're certainly not good enough for our daughter.

Then Jesus, well, all we know about Jesus is what we read and what we hear, and what we experience right in here, in our soul and in our heart. That's what we know about Jesus. And you know, we might have contributed something also to that Easter story, when we don't pay attention to what he said on the cross about supporting each other and keeping our arms around one another. He said that, yes he did, he said that. Or when we don't pay attention to this business about forgiveness. He said that up there on that cross. Or when we forget to be first responders to people around us who have needs. Or when we forget to notice scruffy old dreamers in guitar stores.
(singer) "Christ the Lord is risen today."

Case closed. Amen