

Encountering Our Risen Lord

Lk. 24:1-10

Easter Day, April 8, 2007

I.

Here we are in church this morning, gathered to recognize the most significant event in the history of the world—the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. I do not make that claim lightly. By the time I am finished I hope you will see why I say that.

And it is not complicated. I don't need to stand here and give an academic lecture. In that sense I'm reminded about the story of the young boy who went to church for the first time. On the way home his parents asked him what he thought about the church service. He said, "well, the music was nice, but the commercial was too long." I will try to avoid that this morning.

II.

What do we think about when we contemplate Christ's resurrection? What goes through our minds? I would like to start with two basic ideas.

The first is that Jesus Christ, a unique person sent by God to live among us for a while, took all of the sins of humanity for all time upon himself on the cross, and died with those sins on him rather than on us. If we believe in his sacrifice for us, then we can stand in God's presence on that final day, and we don't have to worry because Jesus will be standing right there with us.

The second point relates to what happens after God says in effect to us "O.K., you believe in Jesus, and your sins are no longer before me." What's next? That's where Christ's resurrection completes the picture. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we also believe that we will be raised in the same way in that great and final day, and that we also will have eternal life in heaven with God.

But not everyone believes this. I have heard some people say that the resurrection did not really happen; that it was a legend that developed in the early church.

Doubts about the resurrection increased during the eighteenth century when science started to become a greater part of peoples' lives, and when many of the great European universities began to flourish. The idea spread that science and human reason should be able to explain all things, and if something was not scientific or reasonable then it was not true. Many of those ideas continue today.

III.

Belief that the resurrection is true has two parts. The first is a recognition of its mystery. The second is the actual evidence of the resurrection, both biblical and non-biblical.

Let's first talk about the mystery, and I will use an example. Susan and I have a dog. You probably have seen Magnolia around the church. And I also have a lawn mower. Now, I understand how that lawn mower works. I've taken it apart and worked on it. But my dog has no clue. Our dog can look at that lawn mower, and walk in circles around it, sniff it, bark at it, and will never have any idea about how it operates.

The same is true for us with some fundamental questions of life, such as how we are supposed to understand God. Well, at that level, we are in many ways like the dog and the lawn mower. The only difference is that the question on the table has just been kicked up a notch.

I recall having a discussion with a person who did not believe in the resurrection because he said it could not be proven. There was no hard evidence of it. And then, not more than thirty seconds later, that same person said he believed there was life on other planets.

Explain that one to me. Maybe there is life on other planets. But I don't understand how the resurrection can be denied for lack of evidence, and at the same time the existence of extra-terrestrial life can just be assumed.

The point here is that we cannot always rely on science and logic and reason to explain everything. And we cannot assume that humanity is so highly advanced that nothing is beyond our understanding.

Therefore, if we accept that we have limitations, then we also have to acknowledge that some things are beyond our ability to analyze, and they remain mysteries that are understood by faith, or not at all.

With that, let's look at why the resurrection is true. We start with the disciples. And we know as a matter of history that Jesus and the disciples actually existed. We don't need to go to the Bible for that. It is confirmed by several independent works, written by scribes and historians of the time.

In fact, some early pagan writers ridiculed Jesus and the disciples, and belittled the disciples' belief in Jesus' resurrection. But look what that means. Even though these writers did not believe in the resurrection, their criticism acknowledged that the disciples existed and it documented, at the time, the disciples' belief that Christ was raised from the dead.

The disciples were eyewitnesses to all that happened. Their stories were not things that were handed down from their ancestors, but rather started with them. They were there, and they saw for themselves.

And the actions of the disciples are instructive. In the two days after the crucifixion they were dejected and disillusioned. They felt all hope had been lost. Then, almost overnight, on the third day, their attitudes changed into joy, and hope, and optimism. They were glowing with confidence and became fearless in the face of persecution. What caused all that?

Well, as both the Bible and outside sources tell us, they began talking about the risen Christ, and they reported their own eyewitness experiences of being with and talking with the resurrected Jesus.

Now, some people might say that they all got together and made it all up so that they could continue to work together. I say that didn't happen for two reasons.

First, that kind of action would have been extremely unethical and fraudulent, and there is no suggestion the disciples were that way. It also would have been entirely inconsistent with the teachings and doctrines of the early church as it developed over the next few decades.

Whatever someone might think about the early church, most authorities agree that its teachings were moral, ethical, and honorable. It would have been extremely out of character for the disciples to have just manufactured the idea of the resurrection.

Second, church traditions and the writings of the early church fathers within less than a century after the crucifixion tell us that all of the disciples continued Jesus ministry as missionaries, and that all of them except John eventually were martyred, were killed, for what they were doing.

I would like to suggest that while people might be willing to die for something they believe is true, people are not willing to die for something that they know is false because they made it up.

The bottom line is that the disciples were there and saw what they saw, and believed what they saw and were willing to die for that belief. And that belief was that Jesus Christ actually was resurrected from the dead.

IV.

With that, consider what the resurrection means in the twenty first century. There are three ways to look at it. One is from the perspective of our own individual lives. Another is how the doctrine of the resurrection relates to the institutional church. And the last is what the resurrection means for how the Christian life fits into society and the world.

Now, don't worry. There is not enough time to cover all three today. Today I will focus only on the first point, which is how the resurrection of Jesus Christ affects you and me.

The short answer is summarized by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. He said that if Christ was not resurrected, then we have no hope of resurrection. He made it clear that our hope of eternal life cannot stand if Jesus Christ was just laid in a grave and that's all there was to it.

In short, Christ's resurrection is just as important as the crucifixion because it is in unity with his resurrection that our own mortal bodies will be made imperishable on that final day.

V.

So, where does this all leave us as we sit here in church this Easter Day? Obviously, I would like to suggest that the resurrection is true, that it happened, and that it is the basis for our eternal hope of being with God.

But that all takes place in the next world. That all happens after we die and depart from this world. What do we do before that time, while we still are living in this world?

It's this. At the end of the day, a strong life-changing Christian belief is not based on arguments or logical presentations put together from authoritative sources. It's based on a personal encounter with the risen Christ. It's based on a relationship with our Lord and Savior in our hearts.

I urge all of you to ask Jesus Christ to come into your life. Even if you have done it before, do it again. If Jesus already is in your life he always will be there, but he calls us to deepen that relationship. It is not a one time thing but a way of life. I have never heard anyone on their deathbed worry about having prayed too much. And you can never try to talk to Jesus too much.

And if you do try, he will come to you; not perhaps in the way you expect or ask, but he will come and you will know that he is there. And this all is possible because Christ has risen, and has taken his place at the right hand of the Father. *Amen.*