

Risen For Us

John 20:1-18, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Easter, April 12, 2009

I.

Once again we heard the Easter Story. It's not new but it never grows old. After the crucifixion Jesus' followers were dejected and disillusioned. They believed all hope had been lost. Then, almost overnight, their attitude changed into joy and hope as they encountered the Risen Lord.

Does that same joy and hope fill us today? How do we understand this momentous occasion that is at the foundation of our faith? If Jesus Christ is God's perfect gift to the world, then it follows that his resurrection is the most significant event in the history of the world.

But that idea is not universally shared, even among people who seem like Christians. I recall hearing someone say he did not believe the resurrection occurred because there was no evidence to support it. A few moments later, however, he said he believed there was life on other planets. Explain that one to me.

Faith always seems to be fighting an uphill battle. God does not get the benefit of the doubt. Yet here we are anyway, sitting in church. And even before we got here we knew what we are going to celebrate. I'm going to preach about the resurrection, which probably does not come as a surprise to anyone. And the music sounds familiar. The flowers are beautiful as always.

So, before I go further with my sermon I would like to raise a question. Why are we here, really? I expect that we all have our own reasons. Some of us are thankful and want to praise God for the blessings we have received. Others might have gone through difficulties and come for strength and support.

And perhaps some of you are here under a little duress. You're here because someone in your family or one of your friends prevailed upon you, and you rather would be somewhere else.

But that's OK, and the fact that you're here says something. Perhaps it says that deep down in your soul, after we put aside the jokes about church attendance, you really want to hear the story one more time. Perhaps you really want to believe that this religion business is not just something people made up centuries ago. Maybe you want to know that Easter means more than new clothes, a nice brunch, or the Easter bunny

And finally, some of us are here because we always are here. This is our home. We want once again to experience God and his only Son, and the love he gives us and the salvation he offers.

II.

On Good Friday I spoke of how Jesus 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.

Today, we complete that picture as we celebrate Easter. It's the other side of the coin. Good Friday tells us what happened for us. Our sins are forgiven. Easter tells us what it means for us. We will be raised from the dead just as Jesus was raised from the dead, and we will have eternal life in heaven with God.

And we will not just be disembodied spirits floating around somewhere. We will have bodies like Jesus had a body when he left the tomb. When we go to the next world we can leave our glasses and hearing aids behind. We won't take our prescriptions with us. We won't need any of that.

But even though the meaning of the resurrection can be awesome, the circumstances of the resurrection are not especially complicated. I don't have to stand here and give an academic lecture about it. That reminds me 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 hope to avoid that this morning.

We can begin by recognizing that the resurrection has two aspects. One is what we know, and the other is what is mystery. Let's begin with what we know and can figure out.

III.

And we can start with the Bible, which is the most studied, most analyzed, and most completely documented book in history. Even from a human perspective, apart from faith, we have to acknowledge that no one has come up with anything to disprove the account of the resurrection. The Bible tells us that it was prophesied in the Old Testament before it happened, it was witnessed in the Gospels as it happened, and it was preached about by Paul and others after it happened.

But the Bible is not our only source. This is important. Many things in the Bible can be verified from other ancient documents. For example, we know a lot from the historians Josephus and Tacitus, who lived during the time the New Testament was being written. They were not part of the Jewish Christian movement, they lived in Rome, and had no reason to make things up.

And from these historical works we still know that a man named Jesus lived about two thousand years ago, and did miraculous works. We know that disciples followed him. We know that he was crucified on orders of Pontius Pilate. We know that the disciples claimed Jesus had been resurrected. And we know they called themselves Christians. We don't have to go the Bible to read those things. They are recorded in ancient history written at the time.

In the same way we also know that Jesus was placed in a tomb. And we know that the tomb was empty three days later. Even the Roman soldiers guarding it agreed that it was empty.

In fact, shortly after Jesus' death early pagan writers who claimed to be enemies of Christianity began to ridicule the disciples because they claimed Jesus had been resurrected. But think what that means. This fact that they criticized it means that the idea existed at the time.

And let's also remember that these disciples were eyewitnesses to all that happened. Their stories were not tales handed down from their ancestors, but rather started with them. They were there at the time. They saw what happened and they wrote it down.

Finally, if disciples were just trying to build a following based on Jesus' life, they didn't need the resurrection. Treating Jesus as a human prophet would have been sufficient.

After all, the Jewish religion started centuries earlier with Abraham and Moses as central figures. And Islam would arise a few centuries later, again based on the human prophet, Mohammed. The idea of a supernatural resurrection was radical, revolutionary, new, and probably confusing. The disciples could have done without it if it did not actually happen.

So, there is much to support what we heard in the readings today. The disciples were there and saw what they saw, and believed what they saw. In addition, the Bible and the accounts of historians of the times agree on some important facts. From those facts we can know that Jesus Christ actually was resurrected from the dead.

IV.

I mentioned earlier the resurrection has two parts. We just heard about what we know and can figure out. The second part, is its mystery.

We simply do not know how it happened. And we will never know but because there were no reporters on the scene. There were no security cameras in the tomb. Those things we rely on today for information obviously weren't around then.

I can use an example about this mystery. Susan and I have a dog. Some of you might have seen Magnolia around the church. We also have a lawn mower. Now, I understand how that lawn mower works. I've taken it apart and worked on it. But Magnolia 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. Just our dog cannot understand the lawn mower, we cannot understand God on our own. It is beyond human abilities. We only know what has been revealed to us through Scripture and the Holy Spirit.

So, we cannot always rely on science and logic and reason to explain everything. And we cannot assume that humanity is so highly advanced that we can know everything. We have to acknowledge that some things are beyond our ability to know, and remain mysteries that are understood by faith, or not at all.

V.

Where does this all leave us as we sit here today? Certainly, I would tell you that the resurrection is true, that it happened, and that it's the basis for our eternal hope of being with God.

But even if we believe that the resurrection is our assurance of life in the next world, what do we do about this world? In the final analysis, a strong life-changing Christian belief is not based on arguments or logical presentations. 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 complain about having prayed too much. You can never talk to Jesus too much.

And if you do, 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.*