

Our Hope and Glory

John 20:1-18

Easter, April 4, 2010

I.

The Easter story begins with a simple reality. The tomb was empty. The place where Jesus was buried on Friday, a place sealed with a huge stone and guarded by Roman soldiers around the clock, was empty on Sunday. The disciples who placed Jesus there saw that it was empty. The Roman soldiers at the tomb agreed that it was empty.

And the evidence is clear that Jesus was placed in that tomb on Friday after he was taken from the cross. The Roman governor approved it. The disciples did it. Jewish leaders who opposed Jesus were worried about it, and Roman authorities reacted to it. And we should know that some of these facts appear in separate historical documents apart from the Bible.

With one exception both the Bible and these independent historical documents describe a singular remarkable idea, which is that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead.

And I should mention this exception to dispose of it. Jesus' body was not stolen. Grave robbers would not neatly have folded the cloth around Jesus' head and left it behind with the burial shroud. And the disciples, who were terrified and scattered to the four winds, would not suddenly have found their courage and organized an operation to steal the body for no apparent purpose.

And in either case no one would have entered the tomb under the noses of the Roman soldiers standing guard. There was no urgency. They could have just waited until the guard was recalled.

Don't we wish that modern technology was there, and a surveillance camera was in the tomb? Would that camera show Jesus opening his eyes, stretching a little, folding up his burial cloth and then walking out? Maybe there would be a blinding flash of light that would disable the camera. Perhaps Jesus' body would just disappear, here one minute and gone the next.

We cannot know the answer to that question, but details of how it happened are not important to our belief. The fact itself is what counts. So today I would like to talk about what we know, what we can figure out, what we accept on faith, and what it all means.

II.

Let's start with the most important part, the meaning of the resurrection. 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.

St. Paul clearly explained this in his first letter to the Corinthians. He said that through Christ's resurrection our own mortal bodies will become eternal and made imperishable on that final day (15:42-54). Our promise of eternal life is linked to the truth of the resurrection (15:16-22).

This belief in our eternal destinies is at the core of our faith. Wouldn't our outlooks on life be different if we thought there was nothing beyond the grave? We would not be here right now. The church as an institution in society would not exist. It would be a dark and dismal world.

But even though we believe that this life is just preparation for a greater life with God, we cling to life, we resist death, we do all we can to retard the aging process. A popular song by Kenny Chesney proclaims that "everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now."

And that's the way it should be. God gave us life so that we might reflect his glory, worship him, and love one another. But God also gave us Jesus Christ to forgive us because we do not always reflect his glory, or worship him, or love one another. And he raised Jesus Christ from the dead to complete his plan of salvation for us, that we may live forever in his presence.

III.

And even though we accept this on faith, don't we also search for ways to actually know it? Well, there are some things we know or can figure out, and they can strengthen our faith.

We might start by recognizing that the Bible is the most studied and analyzed book in history. And yet, while it has not convinced everyone, it has not been disproven by anyone. The Bible tells us the resurrection was prophesied in the Old Testament before it happened, it was witnessed in the Gospels as it happened, and it was proclaimed by Paul and others after it happened.

But the Bible is not our only source. Many parts of 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 privileged lives in Rome, and they had no reason to make things up.

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

In fact, shortly after Jesus' death early pagan writers who were known enemies of Christianity began to ridicule the disciples because of their claims that Jesus had been resurrected. But think what that means. Their criticism of the idea also meant that it existed at the time.

Let's also remember that these disciples were eyewitnesses to all that happened. Their stories were not legends handed down from their ancestors, but rather started with them. They were there. They were involved with what happened and they wrote it down.

And if disciples were just trying to build a following based on Jesus' life, they didn't need the resurrection. In fact, treating Jesus as a human prophet would have been easier and more consistent with culture and society.

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. Buddhism was founded by a human leader during the time of the Hebrew prophets, and Hinduism is not regarded as having any specific founder.

So, the very idea of a supernatural resurrection of a divine being was radical, revolutionary, and probably confusing. If the disciples just wanted to develop a following they could have done so based on Jesus' teaching and preaching during his life. They were familiar with that, and they saw the crowds it produced. They would not have needed to invent the idea of a resurrection if it did not actually happen.

Finally, we also should remember that all the disciples went out into the world as missionaries after Jesus' death. Not one returned to his old job. And church traditions and early writings tell us that that every one of them except John eventually were martyred, were killed, for preaching and teaching about Jesus Christ and the resurrection.

It would seem that while the disciples might have been willing to die for something they believed was true, they would not have sacrificed themselves for an idea they had just made up and knew was false.

The bottom line is that the disciples did not make it up. They were there and saw what they saw, they believed what they saw, and they were willing to die for that belief. And that belief was that Jesus Christ actually was resurrected from the dead.

So, there is much evidence to support what we heard in the readings today. There is the Bible itself, and the accounts of disinterested historians of the times who agree with the Bible on important facts. These give us some evidence, even by worldly standards, that Jesus Christ actually was resurrected from the dead.

IV.

But there is more than just the physical and circumstantial evidence of the resurrection. There also is the mystery that gives rise to our faith. By human standards the resurrection is an unfathomable miracle. In the end, even with the available evidence, we take the resurrection on faith because it is contrary to all we know about nature and science.

But, let us ask whose laws of nature and whose principles of science are at work here. Do we assume we know all there is to know about nature and science, and if we don't understand it, then it doesn't exist?

Another view is that the world is not a closed system of natural laws and scientific principles as we know them. The world operates as it does because God created it, and when miracles such as the resurrection happen it merely is because God chose that his creation would operate in that special way at that particular time.

This would mean that miracles simply are examples of how nature works in accordance with God's will; not according to our limited human understanding. Miracles are examples of the way creation actually is, and are entirely consistent with the idea that God continues to create in the world. The laws of nature are God's laws not ours, and miracles simply are part of the package.

And so we cannot always rely on science and logic and reason to explain everything. And we cannot assume that humanity knows 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 historical analysis 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 lives. 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 overdo talking to Jesus.

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.*