

Believing The Resurrection
John 20:1-18, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Easter, April 24, 2011

I.

When I was in seminary I worked for a summer as a chaplain in a large hospital. It mostly involved visiting patients, comforting them, praying with them, and ministering to their families.

Toward the end of the summer I was given an opportunity to observe an open heart surgery. And "observe" might be an understatement. I was not in some sort of visitors gallery removed from the operating table. Rather, I stood about six inches behind the patient's head. I could have reached out and touched the surgeon. I could have placed my hand on the incision.

I recall looking up at the monitor. All the lines were flat. The patient's heart was not beating. The patient was not breathing. And the surgeon calmly was working away like nothing was wrong.

And nothing was wrong. The patient was hooked up to a heart-lung machine that kept his vital organs supplied with blood and oxygen. But all the lines on the monitor still were flat.

And when the surgery was complete the surgeon took two special paddles, placed them on the patient's heart and said, "Give me twenty." Nothing happened. He said it again. Still nothing happened. The room was very quiet. He said it a third time and I looked up at the monitor and saw a line start to flicker. Then, suddenly the entire monitor lit up. Every line began moving.

I will come back to this shortly. But I can tell you now that as I left that operating room I thought about how straightforward it all seemed, in retrospect. The surgeon routinely did procedures like that. And the experience reaffirmed what I already believed. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.

II.

Now, you might wonder how I just got from Point A to Point B in telling this story. How is the resurrection remotely related to modern medicine? Well, many of you know that before I was a priest I was a lawyer. As a lawyer I frequently was very interested in evidence.

And evidence can take many forms. Sometimes the absence of something can be evidence. Sometimes valid conclusions can be reached through a process of elimination. Sometimes logic and analysis can lead to a realization that certain things probably happened in certain ways.

And in the legal system, at least civil cases, "probably" is good enough. It means "more likely than not," which also means fifty-one percent. That's all you need. After all the evidence is presented if you convince a judge or jury there is a fifty-one percent chance you are right, you win.

Nevertheless, Jesus' resurrection we celebrate today still is a great mystery to many. So, let's just look at some evidence; things we know and things we can figure out.

We can start with the obvious fact. We are sitting here in church. Why is that? I expect we 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, because you might want to hear the story one more time. Perhaps you can be reassured that this religion business is not something people made up centuries ago. Maybe you instinctively understand that Easter means more than a nice brunch, or the Easter bunny.

And finally, most of us are here because we're always here. This is our home. We want once again to know God's love and peace. So, we all are here. That constitutes some evidence.

And the second thing we know is that we all want to feel young. We would like to live as long as we can and push that inevitable day as far into the future as possible. A popular song by Kenny Chesney tells us that "everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to go now."

But there also is the story of the couple who regularly exercised, ate healthy foods, and took care of themselves. Late in life they were in a common accident and went to heaven. Everything was beautiful, serene, and comforting. The husband turned to his wife and said, "You know, if we had eaten what we wanted and forgotten those exercises, we could have been here five years earlier."

As a result, I think we all want to believe in Christ's resurrection. St. Paul said the hope of our own resurrections to eternal life is based on the fact that it first happened to Jesus (1 Cor. 15:13-14). And this belief in our eternal destinies is at the core of our faith, which is more evidence.

By contrast, wouldn't we look at life differently if we thought there was nothing beyond the grave? We would not be here right now. The church probably would not exist. It would be a dark and dismal world. So let's consider this Biblical story more deeply to see how it holds up.

III.

Easter begins with a simple fact. The tomb was empty. Jesus was buried Friday in a place sealed with a huge stone and guarded by Roman soldiers around the clock. On Sunday it was empty. The disciples saw it was empty. The Roman soldiers agreed it was empty.

And 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 entirely apart from the Bible.

For example, we know a lot from the early 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 writings of 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.

So we don't have to go to the Bible to know those things. They are recorded in ancient Roman history written at the time, several years before many books of the Bible were written.

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

And 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 at the beginning and they wrote it down.

So, there is ample evidence to support today's readings. We have not only the Bible, but also accounts of disinterested historians of the times who agree with the Bible on important facts. These facts and circumstances establish, in my opinion by more than fifty-one percent, that Jesus Christ was resurrected. And they clearly put the burden on disbelievers to show otherwise.

IV.

But there is more than just the physical and circumstantial evidence of the resurrection. And even though that evidence can tip the scales, we also believe it through faith and the reality of personal encounters with God's divine power made known to us in extraordinary ways.

Those mysteries are part of our lives in 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 we cannot conclusively prove it.

And that's true even though there is no evidence to the contrary. There is none. No one ever said Jesus was buried somewhere else. No one ever found his bones. Even the supermarket tabloids do not claim that. Instead, we rely on faith from revelation to close the circle.

I recall someone saying he did not believe in the resurrection because it couldn't be proven. A few moments later he said he believed there was life on other planets. Explain that one. Some people imagine religion as whatever they want it to be. That's not faith; it's wishful thinking.

But in any event, some things simply are beyond our capacities to reason and understand. You know Susan and I have a dog. You might have seen Magnolia at church. We also have a vacuum cleaner. I understand how that vacuum cleaner works. I've taken it apart and put it together.

But Magnolia has no clue. Our dog can look at that vacuum cleaner, and walk in circles around it, sniff it, bark at it, and she never will have any idea about how it operates.

The same is true for us with some fundamental questions of life, such as how we understand God. Just as our dog cannot understand the vacuum cleaner, we take that example to a human level and realize we cannot understand God. It simply is beyond our abilities.

This brings me back to the operating room. Open heart surgery did not exist when I was a child. Miracles of modern medicine, which I believe have occurred with God's blessing, have pushed back the limits of what is possible. Surgeons can stop a person's heart, work on it for a while, and start it back up again.

And as I took off my scrubs I thought about how humanity is approaching god-like capabilities. Then I thought about how truly limited we are even as we work what seem to be miracles. And I realized that if imperfect human beings can do what I saw done that morning, certainly our creator God could do what we believe he did Easter morning.

V.

So where does this all leave us as we sit here today? Certainly, I would say the resurrection is true, it happened, and it's the basis for our hope of being with God in the next world.

But what do we do about this world? In the final analysis, a strong life-changing Christian belief is not based on evidence but rather 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 onetime 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.*