

Easter Sermon  
April 21, 2019  
Luke

I hope that each of us asks two sincere questions on this, and every Easter day. Did Jesus rise from the dead? And secondly, if he did, so what?

The circumstantial evidence for the resurrection would not be admissible in court, but it bears mention. The women arrive first at the tomb to do the messy job. That fits the real world story. And the guys? They come along eventually, and even describe the footrace to get there. And notice what you'd expect to see if these are real guys, and not mythic figures. John takes care to point out, "I got there first. We both ran... but I was faster than Pete." Some things never change, do they?

To the first question, if you aren't quite sure how to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead, escaping from a tomb just outside Jerusalem 2000 years ago, you are in really extraordinary company. You are squarely alongside *all of the first disciples* when they encountered the empty tomb.

Listen to the descriptions of the responses of those first witnesses to the empty tomb: In Matthew: fear, trembling, frozen, like dead men; joy; in Mark: amazed, astonished, unbelieving; Luke: perplexed, afraid, wondering; in John: weeping.

Not one of them was singing, "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!"

Everything in the writers' characterization of themselves *tells of how difficult it was, and how slow they were* to recognize what was taking place before their own eyes. The central mystery and event of the Christian faith was nowhere within their expectations when it occurred. We read, instead, of their reluctance to believe this resurrection account! Luke's gospel describes the women reporting to the men about their confrontation with Jesus, risen. And what is the response of these well-trained, Christian spiritual leaders? Luke 24:11: "They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like *nonsense.*"

In Mark's words, "Jesus rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith and *their stubborn refusal to believe those who had seen him* after he had risen." ("*Their stubborn refusal to believe...*") Luke recounts Jesus' statement to them: "*How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!*"

So cut yourself some slack if you haven't quite come to grips with this miraculous mystery. It took time for the original observers to connect the dots. It usually takes time, effort, prayer, and conversation among the faithful before we come to believe that Christ is risen, indeed. Emilie Dickinson, the Belle of Amherst describes the dawning of Truth on our souls this way...

"The Truth must dazzle gradually

Or every man be blind —“

We know that, in short order, these same bewildered disciples grappled with what they saw, and heard, and experienced... and gave the remainder of their lives in the service of this incredible message, “The Lord is risen!” Note that they don’t even attempt to describe how this has happened. They simply declare, with all their being, that this Jesus was unmistakably among them, guiding them forward through what they called impossible.

The next logical question for anyone who has come to believe in this astonishing passage through death to new life should be, “So what?” I don’t mean that to sound dismissive or irreverent. I mean that we, every one of us—sinner, seeker, skeptic, or saint—should inquire ***what it might mean for us*** if this resurrection from death is true.

Is the significance of Jesus’s empty tomb that one man, once--like the ultimate American Ninja Warrior contestant--completed the obstacle course through suffering, a ghastly crucifixion, and beyond humanity’s apparently inescapable destiny, the ending of biological life? That he leapt with superhuman skill over that final challenge to the cheering of the angels above, and then, alone among all humans in the contest, received his heavenly trophy?

What the rest of the New Testament--the part after the resurrection account—tells us is how we, too, can die with Christ, in this earthly lifetime, to everything that diminishes, demeans and defeats us. And in consequence of our faith in God’s miraculous, life-giving love, we, too, can rise with Christ in the beauty, goodness, forgiveness, joy, freedom and power of life in God’s Spirit! Do you long for that exchange? I want that will all my heart! Doesn’t God put that hunger within us to feast on what only God provides?

One of the main impediments to that redeeming, uplifting transformation ***is our natural, human, stubborn refusal to see ourselves as alive in Christ.*** Instead, we can, and often do, focus only what has hurt us or worked against us in our past. “We grew up in dysfunctional families.” Jesus would agree with us, and go further. We grew up in a dysfunctional human race! What Christ’s death and resurrection disprove and replace is the idea that our past setbacks and trouble must determine our future destiny.

Jesus could have rightly complained that his life was unfairly made difficult by the political leaders of his day: by Tiberius Caesar, by King Herod, and Pontius Pilate... So might we complain about our political leadership. His opportunities were limited and denied by the religious leaders of his day, Annanias and Caiaphas, and their sidekicks among the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin... Our churches, too, have flawed, and sometimes shameful leaders. Jesus could, accurately, have complained that his people were oppressed by the political order, subjugated under the savage secular military authority of the Romans. Despots and tyrants continue to crush human hopes and rights in our day. Jesus could complain that he was sabotaged by disloyal associates like Judas, who betrayed him, and Peter, who denied him. And which of us doesn’t remember, with bitterness, being let down by someone we trusted? Jesus might have turned inward, forsaken his trust in a God of miraculous good will and power, and concluded, “I’m the victim of rotten, unfair, and

inauspicious situations. My past experiences shut down my future horizons.” And his continuous rehearsal of that narrative could have locked him into a dead-end outlook that served to explain, excuse, and justify his everlasting death in tombs in every area of his life.

But that is *not his story!* And it need not be our story. How does St. Paul describe the promise and power of our lives in the risen Christ?

**“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, (*now, here, today!* And not just at the time of your death...) he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you...”**

“The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that ***we are God’s children.*** “(*We are not merely the most recent generation of the world’s casualties. Paul is echoing Jesus’ teaching that we have come to share God’s spiritual DNA and God’s purpose for our lives.*)

***Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?*** We could add to Paul’s list: Shall addiction, or abuse, or job loss, or family break up, or poverty, or sickness, or cognitive decline, or venal politicians, or hostile nations, or Putin, or hackers, or Wikileaks, separate us from the love of Christ?

Our Christian faith replies, “No, in all these things we are ***more than conquerors*** through him who loved us.” Paul goes on, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” That is the consequence of Christ’s resurrection!

God raises us in Christ, with him, beginning here and now! Jesus’ resurrection means that we all are more than conquerors—of all that would diminish, demean, or defeat us-- through him who loved us.

In Christ’s power and love, our family life today and tomorrow is not determined by yesterday’s false starts or the misdirection of our parent’s generation.

Our inner moral and spiritual energies in Christ are not determined by our surrounding society’s worst self-seeking or mindless violence.

In Christ, my conscience is no longer chained to my worst thoughts, acts, and the most regrettable chapters of my past.

The people who have hurt and disappointed you have no more power to re-victimize you in repeated memory, because, in Christ’s risen life, you can release them from your judgment into God’s authority.

Our hearts and hands have been opened, in Christ, to share generously, rising above our natural instincts, giving to restore hope and banish fear for our neighbors.

Each of these is an example, and evidence to a skeptical world, of Christ's transcendence of death. Jesus is not entombed. And by faith, neither are we. Our Lord is risen, indeed!

Our hopes for every area of our lives, going forward, are lit by heaven's light, guided by Christ's sure, reliable words, and strengthened by God's living Spirit among us. We have been raised with Christ!

Our world is aching and dying to discover the truth and power and uplifting love of that fact. You, together with Christ, in His Spirit, are Exhibit A of that incredible report. Let it shine! ***Alleluia!***