

Easter Sunday: Holy Trinity Church: April 16, 2017

John 20: 1-18: *Christ Is Risen! We Believe It Too!*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee was once asked if he believed in the resurrection. “Of course I do,” said Huckabee. “Dead people vote in every election we have in Arkansas. Resurrection is very real to us.” Sounds to me like Election Day in district 15 in the City of Cranston, Rhode Island.

Huckabee was being humorous. I am not. But one woman took this question more seriously. She was sitting in church during the Advent season at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. In the course of the sermon the priest foolishly posed this question to the congregation, “What do you really want for Christmas this year?” The woman rose from her pew to answer, “What I would really like for Christmas is to believe in the resurrection.”

I can't help but believe that many Christians are in the same boat. If we really believed in the resurrection, if we really believed that when we leave this world we shall stand before God in Heaven, if we really believed that Christ has prepared a place for us in eternity, if we really believe Jesus lives and that he is in the world today, would we not live more confident, more courageous, more committed lives of service to the marginalized and the most vulnerable of the world? Jesus Christ rose from the dead. That's too much for some to accept. From the very beginning both dedicated disciples as well as cynical critics have struggled with the story of the resurrection. We read that in the gospels. Some said his disciples stole his body. Remember that was Mary Magdalene's response when she first saw the empty tomb. "She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*"(John 20:2).

The resurrection is simply too good to be true in some people's eyes. There must be some rational explanation anything but a resurrection. And yet it is true. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He is alive today. How can I say that with such confidence? First of all, those who experienced his resurrection are such credible witnesses. I would challenge you, if you have any doubts at all about the historical record of the resurrection, go back and read the story for

yourself. The story does not read as something that was made up. It's too chaotic. Notice the initial reaction of the disciples to the resurrection they did not believe it themselves. Mark tells us that when Mary Magdalene and the other women told the eleven disciples that they had seen the risen Lord, even "they did not believe it" (16:11). Luke is blunter: "The disciples did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11).

Even after the risen Christ had made himself known to many witnesses, Thomas, one of Christ's most sincere disciples, would not believe that it could be so. He had to see for himself (John 20:24-25). Even when Christ made his final appearance to his disciples on the mountain where Christ gave them the great commission, Matthew adds these incredible words, "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; BUT SOME DOUBTED" (28:16-17). They were in Christ's presence "but still some doubted."

This is not propaganda. It is not a story fabricated to deceive. No one tried to iron out all of the wrinkles in order to convince us. This is the jumbled testimony of actual witnesses to the most amazing event in history. These witnesses to Christ's resurrection recorded their testimony with all the doubts

of their friends and the accusations of their enemies left intact. I believe in the resurrection because those who experienced his resurrection are such credible witnesses.

I believe in the resurrection because what is most impressive is how the resurrection affected the lives of these early disciples. These people were absolutely transformed. They moved from doubting and fearful to dynamic and ferocious in their witness to the resurrection. Before Christ was crucified Simon Peter denied he even knew Jesus and yet, a mere seven weeks later on the day of Pentecost, Peter told the world, the story of Christ's death and resurrection with such conviction and power that three thousand people became believers (Acts 2:41). How do you explain such a change in a person's demeanor, in a person's conviction, in a person's faith? It's incredible. Even more impressively, none of those who claimed to have met Jesus after his resurrection ever recanted. They were persecuted, tortured, even martyred, and right to the very end they stayed true to their testimony. He is alive!

Father Basil, a Benedictine monk and professor of St. Meinrad Archabbey and School of Theology, told his class of seminarians about an encounter he once had with a Zen teacher while on retreat. As part of the retreat, each person met privately with this Zen teacher. Fr. Basil said, that at his meeting

the Zen teacher sat there before him smiling from ear to ear and rocking gleefully back and forth. Finally the teacher said: “I like Christianity. But I would not like Christianity without the resurrection. I want to see your resurrection!” Fr. Basil noted that, “With his directness, the teacher was saying what everyone else implicitly says to Christians: You are a Christian. You are risen with Christ. That is your Paschal Mystery. Show me, what this means for you in your life and I will believe.” That is how people know if the resurrection is true or not. Does the world see us die to sin and rise with Christ in new life? Does the world see in us the humility to be a servant? Does the death and resurrection of Jesus affect how we live?

The amazing thing is that every one of Jesus’ disciples passed this test. Their lives were dramatically turned upside down by their encounter with Jesus. How would you ever make something like this up and stick to it when you were being stoned as did Stephen, the first Christian martyr? Or as you were being crucified upside down like Simon Peter? It is hard to dispute the testimony of someone who is so convinced of what they have experienced that they are willing to suffer and die to tell the story.

A day after the terrible tragedy at Columbine High School, CNN journalist Larry King did a live interview with a teenage girl named Mickie Cain, a

student who had witnessed the massacre. Mickie was having a difficult time maintaining her composure and was able to blurt out only a few words before lapsing into uncontrollable sobs. Larry King was patient and gave her plenty of time to regain her composure. Mickie recounted the chilling story: “Let me tell you about my friend Cassie,” she said. “Cassie was amazing. She completely stood up for God when the killers asked her if there was anyone in the classroom who had faith in Jesus Christ. She spoke up and said she did and they shot her for it.”

My sisters and brothers in Christ, the critical question is, would you make such a sacrifice for something that you knew was patently untrue, of course you would not, and neither would those early disciples of Jesus. Don't take my word for it. Read the accounts in the Gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles for yourself. These were not wild-eyed fanatics. They were intelligent men and women, responsible men and women, sensible men and women, but something dramatic had happened in their life, something so dramatic, so extraordinary that it could not be denied. They had met Jesus the Christ risen from the grave and they would not testify otherwise even while being tortured and killed. The witnesses are so credible, the change in their lives so dramatic, that their testimony cannot be disregarded.

I believe in the resurrection because without it, the presence of suffering in our world simply cannot be explained. You and I have wrestled with this problem many times. How can a loving God place us in a world where there is so much suffering? In my heart I can only accept one real explanation. It is because the only way we grow spiritually is by struggling with pain. A person who never confronts pain and suffering will forever remain a spiritual infant. But to what end do we grow spiritually? It is so that we might become like Jesus, that we might be fit to dwell with him eternally. The only way I can accept some of the deep tragedies I see in this world is to believe that this world is a preparatory school for a better world yet to come.

I knew a woman named Rosemary who worked in the Alzheimer's Unit of a nursing home that our laboratory serviced. Rosemary and a colleague named Arlene brought the residents of the home together one Good Friday afternoon to view Franco Zeffirelli's acclaimed production *Jesus of Nazareth*. They wondered whether these elderly Alzheimer's patients would even know what was going on, but they thought it might be worth the effort. When they finally succeeded in getting everyone into position, they started the movie. Rosemary was pleasantly surprised at the quiet attention being paid to the screen. At last came the scene where Mary Magdalene comes upon the empty tomb and finds Jesus body gone. An unknown man, in reality the risen Jesus, asks Mary why

she is looking for the living among the dead. Mary runs as fast as she can back to the disciples and tells Peter and the rest with breathless excitement, “He’s alive! I saw Him, I tell you! He’s alive.” The doubt in their eyes causes Mary to pull back. “You don’t believe me . . . You don’t believe me!” From somewhere in the crowd of Alzheimer’s patients came the clear, resolute voice of Esther, one of the patients. “WE BELIEVE YOU,” she said, “WE BELIEVE YOU!” Well, Esther, we believe it too. The evidence is overwhelming, and life makes no sense without it. My brothers and sisters, Jesus the Christ rose from the dead. Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is risen indeed! We do believe! Say, ALLELUIA, SAY AMEN!