

RESURRECTION IS FOR REAL

After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”

MATTHEW 28:1-10

I am one of the biggest skeptics I have ever known. When I hear of some outlandish story I quickly dismiss it. I laugh every time I hear of a UFO sighting and any mention of intelligent life forms visiting us from a far-away galaxy. I politely giggle every time someone tells me they believe in ghosts or demons or the devil. I am mystified by how gullible people can be, falling for the newest fad or spending their life savings on a miracle cure to postpone death. Do you remember the woman in Florida who was eating a grilled cheese sandwich when she noticed the face of the Virgin Mary in her half eaten sandwich? She held onto the sandwich for 10 years before she sold it to someone on ebay for \$28,000.

There have also been quite a few Jesus sightings over the last few years. Jesus has been seen in an oyster shell, a dental x-ray, a Chihuahua's ear, a tortilla and a Polish pierogi, to name just a few. The pierogi sold for a miserly \$1700 on ebay. For someone who died 2000 years ago, Jesus sure makes a lot of peculiar reappearances.

On Good Friday I took Laurie and my skeptical self to see the new movie "Heaven Is For Real." I had heard about the book based on the so-called true story about a young boy who nearly died on an operating room table. According to the young boy, he went to heaven and met Jesus as well as a few of his deceased relatives he had never met. He was serenaded by angels, sat on the lap of Jesus, and then was sent back to earth to resume his life. The boy's father, a pastor, had a hard time believing his story, but he was convinced that his son had experienced something that gave him comfort.

So what do we do with the Easter story? Jesus had been crucified on a cross by Roman soldiers, and following his death he was placed in a sealed tomb guarded by soldiers to make sure the friends of Jesus did not steal his body. A couple of women went to the tomb early Sunday morning in order to anoint the body of Jesus and cover up the smell of death so that he could receive a proper burial. When they arrived at the tomb there was a great earthquake, followed by the appearance of an angel that looked like lightning clothed in white. The angel assured them that there was nothing to fear, that Jesus had risen from the dead, and that they should go tell the others that Jesus would be making an appearance. As they left Jesus appeared to them and they took hold of his feet and worshipped him.

Most people don't have a problem with the death of Jesus. Our problem is the resurrection. Nearly all of us have experienced death to one degree or another, whether it be a parent, child, sibling, friend, or a pet. I have been to numerous death vigils awaiting a loved one to breathe their last while family and friends say their last goodbyes and support each other. And I have performed countless funerals and seen coffins lowered into the ground or ashes scattered. But not once have I experienced a resurrection and I seriously doubt that any of you have either. The concept of the resurrection just isn't rational. It is incomprehensible to believe that dead people rise from the grave.

Though not rational and incomprehensible, I do believe in the resurrection. Like some of you I have experienced the risen Christ in my life. During times in my life when I was so depressed and alone that I wished I were dead, I have experienced God's love and presence holding me as closely as I have been held by any other. I have witnessed first-hand the miracle of the birth of a child. I have assisted drug addicts who have lost everything receive new life as their past has died and been buried. I have witnessed couples on the brink of divorce fight to rebuild their marriage, as well as seen marriages die with new life and relationships resurrected.

The reason we celebrate the resurrection on Easter Sunday is because that same Spirit of the risen Christ lives in me and in you and in all who have the experience of his continuing presence. And so because Jesus is alive and well in this community, there are some things I believe in. I believe in the Savior who died on the cross to break the power of everything that threatens to enslave or oppress or distort or destroy our humanity. And I believe in a God who takes all our pain and sorrow and suffering and sadness and loss and death and turns it all into new life. And I believe in the new life that came into being on that Easter morning and that will one day transform everything and everyone. Because of the Easter presence of the Spirit is alive and well in this community, I believe in a God who loves us with a love that never lets us go—whose “steadfast love endures forever”. And I believe in a God who never, ever abandons anybody. And I believe in a God for whom “we are all beloved daughters and sons of God”! That means that there is no one who is beyond the grace and mercy and love of God. Because of the Easter presence of God is alive and well in this community, I believe in the God who fills this whole creation with the beauty and goodness and truth and love. And I believe in a God who is working to restore the whole creation to the place where it is once

again “very good.” And I believe in a God who brings hope out of hopelessness and new life out of death.

Simply put, because the Spirit of Easter is alive and well in this community of faith, I believe in a God who is working to bring grace and peace and mercy and love and justice and freedom and joy and life into every life. To me, that’s what Easter is all about. That’s what the resurrection is all about. But because I believe in this God, the God who raised Jesus from the dead—there are some things I refuse to believe in. I refuse to believe in death and hell and Satan, as if they were somehow more real than God’s love and God’s presence and God’s gift of new life. I refuse to believe that death gets the last word in our lives. I refuse to believe that despair and decay get to define our very existence. I refuse to believe that I am defined by my illnesses or my shortcomings. I refuse to believe that nothing can ever break the vicious cycles of violence and injustice and despair and death in this world. I refuse to believe that we have no hope and no love and no freedom and no real life. For I believe that God has the last word, and God will not allow the worst of things to triumph over the best of things. Ultimately, love wins.

At the end of the day, it seems to me that the real meaning of Easter is the continuing presence of Christ in all our lives. It means that for us, “Jesus is the light in our darkness, the bread that satisfies our hunger, the vine that is the source of our life, the healer who makes us whole”. Not “Jesus was,” but “Jesus is.” Easter is like a promise that points toward a future filled with hope and joy and love and life. But it is a promise that we can all begin to experience right here and right now because Jesus is alive and well in us all. Although we may never understand all that Easter means, because Jesus is alive and well in us, we can believe that resurrection is for real.