

A Sermon Delivered by
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Saint Peter's Episcopal Church
Glenside, Pennsylvania

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If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you may bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. (John 15:7-8)

Not too long ago, as an older woman entered a fashionable Episcopal Church, the usher asked her where she would like to sit. When she indicated that she wanted to sit in the front pew, the usher said that wasn't a good idea because they were having a very boring guest preacher that morning. The woman, bristling at that response asked, "Do you know who I am?" When the usher said no, she said "I am the preacher's mother!" The usher asked her if she knew who HE was, to which she replied no. "Good," said the usher.

Well it's Mother's Day, and this story clearly speaks to the power and influence mother's have in all our lives. And this story is also a roundabout way of saying perhaps that we are at all times, and in all places, cautioned to be very careful about our actions and behavior because we may have to proclaim the good news in unexpected circumstances. During the Easter season, that motherly advice seems particularly relevant to the unique good news we affirm and seek to share with others; "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed." Sometimes that's a tough sell.

One New England rector described it this way:

We go to church every year during the Easter season to hear the sacred words, "Christ is risen!" and to respond with joy. And yet, every year there seem to be new challenges to that truth. A few years ago for example The Davinci Code popularized the idea that Jesus and Mary Magdalene had a child – that there are descendents to this day. The novel was so convincing and life-like that people actually asked if it were true. The secular world keeps trying to hack away at the Christian tradition – to deflate the hope.

Well it seems to me there is some truth to that insight about deflating the hope, and it poses a challenge for those of us in the church who seek to tell the truth about the Gospel, but do not want to water it down, or dumb-it-down, so that it becomes too easy or ineffectually simplistic.

For example, The Apostle Paul's challenge to the Christians in first century Corinth about their beliefs found specifically in First Corinthians 15, alert us to the reality that the resurrection and its unique nature have been an item for debate since the very beginnings of Christianity. The earliest written Gospel, Mark, that we used this year on Easter Sunday, simply mentioned the women finding the tomb empty, ...and then the text ended.

Some twenty years later when Matthew and Luke were written, stories of seeing the resurrected Christ were added on to the tradition. The last Gospel written in the New Testament – the Gospel of John – added even more stories of the risen Christ with his disciples. So the net result is an aggregate collection of compiled and quite likely edited stories of the original Easter. Together these varied perspectives have profound implications for what this basic pivotal event means for believers.

Then to add to the rich mix, or to muddy the waters further, depending on your point of view, the first Christians in various communities started discussing what Jesus was like. Some said he was a man – not God. Others said he was all spirit and not flesh. Some said the resurrection was transcendentally spiritual, and not physical at all. Others proclaimed the bodily resurrection of Christ. The Apostle Paul, by the way, was in that camp – in fact, the leading teacher of that camp.

Historically, the man we have come to call “Saint Paul” was initially a Jewish Pharisee who believed in the possibility of resuscitation, or what some around the edges called, resurrection. Yet after his vision of the revealed Christ on the road to Damascus, seeing Jesus in bodily appearance and form, Paul became so convinced of his Epiphany, that he ardently proclaimed the power of God from his own experience. His belief was forever transformed and authenticated. By the 4th century the idea of the bodily resurrection of Christ had become the standard view; and that marked the beginning of orthodoxy: or what some called the correct, or the “right” interpretation, about the resurrection.

And today of course the debate continues, and the ongoing discussions can get rather heated at times. We are living in a period where our theology is not simply a matter of intellectual concepts and formulas, but personal experiences, individual convictions, and private beliefs – sometimes even ideologies. In fact we are overwhelmed with a deluge of religious material extending from church bulletins and worship leaflets to sophisticated blogs and colorful websites on the Internet. It is not for lack of information that people are questioning their faith – data is readily available – it is more that individuals are seeking relevant and meaningful experiences that help them integrate, assimilate and understand the authenticity of their beliefs – while at the same time, maintaining their freedom of choice to select other approaches or different ideas that might come along in the future. At best, this has created a healthy tension between what some call “progressive” approaches to faith versus orthodox and more “traditional” approaches to faith.

But the downside to all this openness and transparency is that further questions continue to develop. For instance - Is it one true faith that people are seeking using a variety of different approaches? Or is the quest for meaningful faith somehow qualitatively different and of an entirely separate category; a radical departure from that which had originally been accepted?

Sincere Christians are caught in the middle of this dispute, and are struggling to find a defining piece, perhaps the one defining piece, that links us all together as followers of the man Jesus. The resurrection – at least theoretically – is that linking belief, the key that opens the mystery of faith for all.

In very personal terms – in spite of considerable skepticism, rational analysis, and even moments of profound doubt over the years, I now readily acknowledge and admit to belief in the resurrection because it opens the possibility of hope – hope in things unseen, unnoticed and unimagined. I also believe that hope transcends my limited understanding and goes way beyond my far-too-narrow point of view.and probably beyond yours too.

The Good News is that resurrection grants a venue and permits a frame of reference which allows seekers to take a leap of faith and believe honestly and truthfully. That belief is staggering in scope. God has so much faith in humanity that he became one of us; that he died and rose again in order to

reveal that divine spark of hope. Hope in the final analysis is what it's all about. Hope always, everywhere, and eventually, wins out over despair.

So what can we say in the face of this compelling truth? Just this. God has done everything necessary for us and our salvation. Our response is simply to give thanks, rejoice and be glad.

Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

CREDITS:

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