

“Questions We Ask”
John 20:1-18
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Many years ago in another setting a colleague resigned on April Fools’ Day. It was not a real resignation and it was not on a Sunday, much less Easter Sunday. In fact, Easter has not fallen on April Fools’ Day since 1956, four years before I was born, and it won’t do so again until 2029 and then 2040, after which it won’t happen again this century. But Warren did resign as a kind of April Fools’ joke on this day.

He handed everyone a letter at our staff meeting. As we read it, there were sighs and groans. One person started weeping inconsolably, tears streaming down her face. As she finally caught up with the rest of us and read that one sentence hidden in the last paragraph which referred to April Fools’ Day, her grief turned quickly to relief. But relief turned even more quickly to rage as she jumped to her feet and let Warren have a piece of her mind! We thought that might be his end right there.

It was high risk humor. We all laughed eventually, but I do not recommend resignation as an April Fools’ joke. It’s just too unsettling. In fact, all April Fools’ jokes are because they are deceptive, they meddle with the truth, and despite all our struggles in this realm, truth still matters immensely.

We plead with our children to be honest because if we don’t have the truth, we don’t know what else we have. We want the truth from our spouses, employers and teachers, indeed everyone in our lives. And we know what chaos we have experienced in our national life because in addition to the many challenges we have, we now must take into account constant challenges to the truthfulness of any story and the suggestion that there are not just alternative stories, but alternative facts, which is an oxymoron. Truth matters in every realm of life, including faith.

In fact, theologian Karl Barth said this is the primary question of faith not only on Easter but every day of the year - is it true? Is there

really a God? Is there really more than this life? Is there really an ultimate purpose for my life? Is it true? I think this is *a* primary question of faith and at least part of why Easter pews are always full.

Some clergy poke fun at those who attend church only at Christmas and Easter and I like to see people more often. But not only do I realize that our schedules are crazy, I know there are many reasons people drop out of church life. Sometimes the church fails to live up to its calling and sometimes life brings so much suffering, it is difficult to see where God could be at work. But there are also questions people have about the truthfulness of it all, especially these claims about resurrection. And yet, we want to believe, we need to believe. So, we come on a day like this looking for a reason.

And lest we become too critical at this point, judgmental of the struggle to believe, we should take a closer look at the characters in the biblical story and see how they respond to the possibility of resurrection. In John's version of the story, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb very early in the morning, while it is still dark, and discovers that the stone has been rolled away. She does not jump up and down with joy at the prospect of resurrection, but assumes someone has taken Jesus' body.

So, she runs to Simon Peter and another disciple and asks for their help in figuring out where the body is. They race to the tomb, literally, and go in one at a time and confirm that Jesus' body is not there. John says they believe something, but he doesn't say what, though he notes that they do not understand the scripture that he must rise again.

At this point, they return home, but Mary stands weeping outside the tomb. She still does not believe Jesus is alive. Two angels happen to be there and they ask why she is weeping. She tells them someone has taken Jesus' body. At this point, she notices someone else. Has he been there all along or just shown up? We don't know, we only know it is Jesus, but Mary does not recognize him. She thinks he's the gardener. He asks why she is weeping and for whom she is looking and she pleads with him to tell her where he has put the body if he has moved it.

So, at this point, Jesus calls her by name. "Mary!" he says and finally she knows it is him. Earlier in this Gospel, Jesus says he knows his own sheep by name and he leads them out (10:3). Indeed, he does,

but it takes Mary and the others some time to recognize him. They find it hard to believe Jesus could be alive even when he is standing right in front of them! They have, after all, just watched him die a painful death.

Yet, in the end, they do believe. So, maybe there is hope for us. Early followers of Jesus struggle mightily to embrace the truth of this experience, but in the end, they do. Maybe there is hope for us.

Yet how can we know for sure or at least at some level of confidence? We cannot go like Peter and the other disciple into the tomb and see for ourselves. We do not see and hear Jesus like Mary. There is no video footage of the resurrection or even a snapshot of the resurrected Jesus. Perhaps if someone goes back in time, takes a camera and returns, we could see an image... but still, would this do it?

Does a shroud with a supposed imprint of Jesus' face do anything one way or another or a burial crypt with what someone thinks may be the holy family? Is resurrection something that can be proven in this way? Or is it a matter of faith which scripture says is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1)?

I suspect most of us who come to believe do so very much like people in the early church do, and here I am not talking about the very first disciples we encounter in the biblical story itself, but those who live amidst great persecution during the first couple of centuries, yet somehow still believe. How do they do it? It is not because they are told they have to nor is it because someone makes a compelling argument. It is because they encounter the Spirit of the Risen Christ in some way. It is because they experience resurrection in some form, life coming out of death, hope growing out of despair.

The best argument for resurrection is the transformation of fearful followers into faithful disciples who are willing to die for their faith. What else could explain this transformation other than an encounter with the Risen Christ? The same can be said of faithful disciples in the early centuries when it is risky to believe. Preparation for baptism in this time is preparation for death, this is what confessing Christ as Lord means in the Empire. What else could persuade people to take such a risk other than a personal experience of some kind with the Risen Christ?

So it goes for us. We confirm the truth of our faith claims through personal experience with Christ and with resurrection. And here I mean the Spirit of Christ and resurrection in the sense of new hope where there was only despair, new life where there was only death in some sense.

I think of people who have lost spouses and children and parents, and in the process, felt a kind of death deep within them, a withering of the spirit; yet somehow at some point, they have discovered a reason to live again, have felt new life breathing within them. I think of friends and loved ones who have lost critical things – marriages, homes, careers, the ability to drive or the essence of who they are due to some crippling illness – and in the process, have experienced a kind of death deep within; yet somehow over time, they have found a reason to live. I think of people who have experienced a profound failure or disappointment or struggled with some addiction that has threatened their very existence; yet at some point with some help, they have found the will to live again.

All have experienced a kind of rebirth or resurrection. All have sensed the nearness of the Risen Christ in some way. All have come to believe again not because of any argument or word of encouragement, though both can help, but because of personal experience of some kind.

I think of the founding pastor at the church I served before moving to Raleigh, Dr. Jack Noffsinger. He was a chaplain at Iwo Jima. He buried thousands in a day, after having watched them die; not strangers, most of them, but people he had come to know and love. Jack said he nearly lost his faith at Iwo. He had seen so much suffering and death on both sides of the battle. It was difficult to see any point in life, any place where God was at work for good.

But then, he helped lead an Easter Sunrise Service at Mount Suribachi. At first, he just went through the motions, but somewhere in the midst of that service, he sensed the nearness of the Risen Christ, he felt the beginnings of rebirth deep within him, his spirit was resurrected and he reclaimed his belief. That's how it works, that's how we come to believe, through the inner working of the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

In fact, even churches can have this kind of experience. Many struggle mightily, yet have some experience of rebirth. This church had such an experience in the 1830's. There was conflict over the

Campbellite movement and the majority left to join this movement. As Glenn Jonas notes in his work on our history, the church nearly died or we might even say that it did die. But from the last few embers of a dying rubble, a fire was rekindled. The church came back and grew, enduring various periods of war and peace, wealth and poverty, hope and despair. And thus, it exists, indeed thrives, to this day. Resurrection is not just a grand idea connected to an old story that moves us if we buy into it. Resurrection is a reality we experience.

Some of you know I was a big Harry Chapin fan. I heard him in concert many times, talked with him, and performed a good bit of his music. My college roommate, with whom I performed the most, actually got to perform with Harry once, but never told Harry who had introduced him to his music...

Anyway, for those who do not know, Harry Chapin was a singer/songwriter and award-winning playwright who also wrote most of the music for "The Cotton Patch Gospel". He mostly told stories one way or another. Some of his stories, like "Cat's in the Cradle", hit home immediately for most listeners. Others, like a song he wrote about a sniper, provoke insight into people we might not want to understand, but need to as a society. This song feels relevant in this day of many mass shootings. But some of Harry's stories seem so outlandish as to be just sentimental, until we have a reason to hear them in a different way.

I will never forget an article a writer for "The Courier Journal" wrote just before Harry performed a concert in Louisville, Kentucky. He talked about how sentimental some of Harry's songs had seemed to him, especially one called "Mail Order Annie" which is about a mail order bride who goes to marry a farmer in the Midwest. Both farmer and bride are anxious about this arrangement, but deep hope is expressed by the farmer in an incredibly tender way.

The writer said he always heard this song and thought, "That's a creative story set in another time. That's interesting." Then, he read about and followed up on a story that was taking place in his time, this was the 1970's. A man in the Midwest had advertised his need for a bride and there were genuine responses to his request. This wasn't some

sordid tale that might find a place in the tabloids, but a real human story of loneliness and isolation followed by connection and love. In other words, “Mail Order Annie” became real. It was not just a sentimental tale romanticizing a time gone by. It was real!

The writer said the next time he heard the song in concert, tears streamed down his face. It wasn’t just a song anymore, it wasn’t just a story; it was real.

That’s how it goes with the Easter story, the defining story of our faith. It seems like a creative tale set in another time, interesting certainly, but a bit sentimental, outlandish even. People argue over whether things actually happened like the story says, but that’s a little tricky to sort out since it was so long ago, there are differences in the various versions and Jesus doesn’t seem to be walking about anywhere. There is a story about an Ascension, but that too is an old story. What do we make of it?

But then, we have an experience which makes this story come to life. We don’t just read about it. We live it! We encounter the Spirit of the Risen Christ in some way – in worship, in a time of prayer, on a mountaintop or overlooking the ocean, in a hospital room or even at a cemetery - and we experience rebirth, resurrection, life where we felt only death before. We can’t explain it or prove it to anyone else, but we don’t have to, we just know. And because we do, the story isn’t just a story anymore, it is life itself, and thus, as we hear it, tears stream down our face, tears of joy.

We still ask questions from time to time, questions about why there is still so much suffering and evil all around us if resurrection power has been set loose, questions not about whether the story is true but in what sense it is true, questions about the nature of eternity. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. It cannot be proven and eternity is a mysterious thing, far too large for us to grasp. But if we have encountered the Risen Christ and experienced some form of resurrection, we have the answers we need, and because we do, we can trust that no matter what challenges we face in the present day, everything will be “O.K.” in the end.