

Easter Day B
April 1, 2018

Grace Church/Lexington
Fr. James+

Exodus 14:10-14, 21-25: 15:20-21 Psalm 118:1-4, 14-29 Acts 10:34-43 *John 20:1-8*

Is It True?

How can it be that Holy Week is so different from one year to the next? I was reminded again on Good Friday of the vitality of the faith of those with whom I worship. Through the Good Friday experiences of many years the cross has become embedded in my understanding of life and is a part of me. I cannot see life without it. And so it was for the early Church. Those new Christians saw all of life through the lens of the resurrection, the cross and the exaltation of Christ. I am not as thoroughly imbued with an understanding of resurrection as I am cross, but I am growing. There is within me a thorough understanding that those early Christians saw everything through the resurrection. Now it remains for me to see that, too. There is something to be said for living with and in the faith for many years. What do we know of the resurrection?

First, no one saw the resurrection. There were no

observers. There is no proof, legal, medical, historical or otherwise for the resurrection. Second, the details for the accounts that we have do not all jibe. The time of the women's coming to the tomb varies, how many were there, what and whom they found when they arrived at the tomb. Several contradictions. Third, only believers saw him risen. Not only do we have no verification of any Easter from sources external to the Christian Testament, that Testament itself admits that that is the case. For example, in today's lesson, Peter admits that “God made Jesus manifest—not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate, and drank with him after he rose from the dead.”

What can we say to all of this? There is no proof, there is a lack of harmony between the accounts and only followers of Jesus were witnesses? First, we can say that the faith of those first Christians was not founded on the empty tomb, or the empty cross for that matter, but on personal encounters with the risen Christ. Second, although the accounts do not jibe exactly, there is a remarkable agreement given the reality that each writer wrote one

or two generations after the event and for different purposes. The accounts are not at all irreconcilable. Third, while it is apparently true that only followers saw him risen, it is not as if they were anxious to see him. Indeed, they were by and large skeptical, fearful and unbelieving. I don't think Doubting Thomas was an exception. He just had the misfortune of seeing this resurrected Jesus after the others. Besides, who could claim that an unbeliever would be a better witness than a believer? Who would you have it be? Surely we would not expect the High Priest or the Sanhedrin or the Romans to be able to be any more unbiased in their direction than the believers might have been in theirs.

So we have no proof. Even if we had twenty-first century proof of his death and resurrection, assuming that first-century people did not know a dead man or one who was alive when they saw one, we would have no proof that God had raised Jesus from the dead. We would merely have another medical wonder. You see, belief in the risen Christ is not a matter of proof. It is a matter of faith.

Given that, what was the nature of the resurrection? First, Jesus was dead. While it can be questioned in some speculative attempt to explain what happened later, we do know from the Christian Testament and external sources that Jesus died—no real question about it. And death is death—the same for each of us. Second, Jesus did not bring *himself* back from the grave. There was no lingering divine spark that roused him after 36 hours like some metaphysical spontaneous combustion. The Christian Testament in no place even hints at that. What is claimed is that God raised Jesus from the dead. And whatever you decide to think about that, I suggest that if you believe that there is a God, then belief that God can do what He wills follows rather easily. Again, this belief is a matter of faith, not proof.

Third, all reports about the risen Christ indicate that he was real. Different, in some ways, but the same Jesus who had been baptized by John, whipped the money changers in anger, cursed the fig tree, died on a Roman cross—the same man. He walked, talked, ate, slept—he was real, alive and in person in time and

space.

Unless Jesus had been raised by God from the dead, his teachings would be like those of any other great teacher. Disciples of the Buddha, or Confucius or Marx or Freud look back to the *teachings* of their leader, but not to the man. One can be a student or disciple of Marx without any sense of personal loyalty or fealty to Marx. Not so in Christianity. One can treat the teachings of Jesus with respect, even attempt to live by them, and not be a Christian. Until you come to a personal devotion of the man Jesus, the living Christ, in whose light and with whose direction you live your individual life, you are not Christian. If Christ is not risen, there is no Christian. Our faith, our loyalty, our focus is in the living Christ. Karl Barth, considered by many to be the greatest theologian of the twentieth century was once asked, “Why do people come to church?” Barth answered, “People come to church asking the question: “Is it true?””

The somberness of Holy Week, as seen in the dramatic dark of Tenebrae (if we celebrate that office), the light of love on

Maundy Thursday, the gloom of Good Friday are only part of the picture. Good Friday is not a funeral day for Jesus, but the day on which we realize the triumph he claimed in suffering and death. It came as no surprise to Jesus that he was to die. He expected to. So do we all. That he died sooner than some and for a great cause is not to be lamented. Would that we all could hope for so significant a death.

During Holy Week we remember man's inhumanity to man and how that must have been seared into the experience of those disciples—Peter and John, Mary and Salome—those many years ago. Ultimately, how joyful that first Easter must have been for them!

And then I read Mark's Gospel. They went up to the tomb, they being Magdalene, another woman named Mary and one, Salome, with a single hope—to be able to get into the tomb to anoint the body of their dead friend and teacher—buried now some 36 hours. What they found was an empty tomb!□

Imagine how you would feel if you were to take a trek with

flowers to the grave of someone you cared about. When you arrive, you find the head stone, and to your growing horror a huge hole in the ground, and at the bottom of the hole a broken and empty casket. Now joy is not the emotion that would flood your being. Believe me. Not even if there were a good looking young man there to tell you that your sister or mother or friend was risen from the dead. You would run, and depending on your temperament you would be horrified, angry, frightened, purposeful or confused, but joyful? Hardly. Now, in 2018 you have the knowledge of one who was raised from the dead, and joy is the appropriate response to your knowledge. These women and the disciples themselves had no such precedent. They were not joyful. They were frightened. They were afraid of the implications. They were sickened at the desecration of Jesus' body, and afraid the authorities would blame them. Unwilling to face those implications on top of the humiliation of his unjust death, the scandal of the crucifixion at the hands of the hated Romans, the shame of condemnation by the religious of their own faith, there

comes this disappearance of the mutilated body of the recently executed Jesus. Can anything else go wrong? Was Murphy's Law ever more evident in human experience?

That is the Easter scene I see portrayed in the Christian Testament. Well what about it? Is this or is this not a reasonably faithful reading of the accounts we have?

We all know that the women and the disciples did not live for long in this state of shock, repulsion and fear. Something happened to change that early emotional evaluation of the significance of the empty tomb. It is on that change in interpretation that Christian faith rests. What changed within those early disciples must change for you. Unless he lives within you, he does not live at all for you and is no more than any other great teacher—to be separated from his teachings. It is this *person* who is alive and well. Only the *risen* Christ makes possible the presence of the *living* person. But how does this living person make himself known to you? How can God in Christ be contemporaneous here? Only in his relationship to you and to me.

If he is seen as Christ in himself, by himself, He is not so present.

He who alone is the Christ is the One who is present in the Church, in relationship to you and to me. Martin Luther says, “So it is one thing if God is there, and another if he is there for you.” *So be it.*