

I Believe in the Resurrection of Christ

Matthew 28: 1-10

I believe in the resurrection of Christ! As we worship this Easter morning 2005, my word to you is just that: I believe in the resurrection of Christ.

As a child, I attended several Easter sunrise services held in the town cemetery. I remember standing out there in the cemetery with a certain feeling fear, but without much doubt about the Easter story. Mine was probably the normal faith of a child, willing to believe what adults told me. The concern I felt was mostly about being out there in the cemetery. These were the normal fears of a child staring at the face of death.

Isn't faith what Easter is truly about -- the ability to face death, our own mortality and that of our loved ones? Isn't it the ability to stand in the face of all that fear and still, by faith, to stand? Easter is not the story of a man brought back to life. Resurrection is not the same thing as resuscitation. The quality of resurrection life is divine.

Our faith has got to be in what stands behind the events of that first Easter, whether those events are understood literally, metaphorically, or spiritually. But the events are a place to start. What do you think happened on that first Easter? Let's look at the facts -- just the facts. You be detectives and help me with this investigation. What can we uncover in such an investigation? The source of our investigation will be the New Testament Gospel according to Matthew.

- Q. For this to be a good police report, we have to identify the facts and then interpret the facts. The source for this investigation is Matthew's version of the story. Apparently, it's not significantly different than others. Is this true?
- A. Well, there are some different details, but the big picture is about the same.
- Q. When did this incident occur?
- A. It was after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning. That means dawn on Sunday, after the crucifixion Friday
- Q. How long?
- A. About 39 hours after death
- Q. Who were the persons involved?
- A. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary
- Q. Where did this event take place
- A. Joseph's tomb. The women went to the tomb where Jesus was buried
- Q. What happened?
- A. Suddenly there was like a great earthquake.
- Q. I don't remember any earthquake.
- A. I guess it was highly localized.
- Q. What caused it? What's the explanation?
- A. Evidently, an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on it

- Q. I need a description of this alleged angel
- A. Male. Appearance like lightning, maybe shafts of lightning blazed from him; clothing white as snow
- Q. What happened next?
- A. The two guards shook, scared to death; probably fainted
- Q. Did the alleged angel say anything?
- A. 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.'
- Q. Were those his exact words?
- A. I don't know for sure. The women were pretty psyched at that point.
- Q. What did they do next?
- A. They left the tomb and ran to tell his disciples.
- Q. What happened when they got there?
- A. They never got there.
- Q. They never got there? Why not?
- A. They met Jesus.
- Q. Jesus? The deceased? They met Jesus?
- A. That's right. He seemed to appear out of nowhere, suddenly. Jesus met them and said, "'Good morning!" They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him!'
- Q. What did they do then?
- A. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him!'
- Q. Was that everything?
- A. No, Jesus talked to them.
- Q. Another message?
- A. Well yes, but Jesus was speaking for himself.
- Q. What did he say, "
- A. "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. Go tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there."
- Q. Anything else happen?
- A. Not right away. We've had some other reports of appearances and the like. At this point, the guards aren't talking and the women and those disciples won't stop talking.

Okay, so let's review evidence. An alleged angel causes an earthquake apparently by rolling the stone away from the tomb entrance. That's some stone and some alleged angel! With the stone gone, there was revealed an empty tomb. Nobody was there - no body at all!

Then, this alleged angel delivered a message from some boss higher up. Okay, we have an angel with a message, then an empty tomb. Then there's the appearance of

Jesus himself. Jesus met the women, right, and told them to go to Galilee? That was Jesus' home and his base of operations.

I just have one more question – “What does it all mean?”

What's going on in the story of that first Easter proclaimed in Matthew's gospel? How much of this is factual? How much of the language is meant to be symbolic? What's Matthew really saying to his people and to us? In other words, what the point of the story?

To find the meaning of the gospels, remember that they were probably written to be read in the early church's worship services. That's why those three depict Jesus' ministry as taking place in one calendar year. What happened after Jesus' death represents a single truth: from the stories of that first Easter to Jesus' return to heaven. It is a single reality, a holy mystery, told as a story. The language is metaphorical because how else do you describe the unknowable? The message is simply: Jesus was dead and Christ is alive.

So what do we need to believe about Easter and resurrection? There are several options for interpreting what happened. Let's not get stuck in arguments about those interpretations. We can do that in House Church or Sunday School. Besides, our arguments are relatively unimportant when compared to the meaning of the resurrection story.

Let's consider three questions. Why is it important for us affirm the resurrection? What brings us to a resurrection quality of life? What is the faith question in this story? With what can we leave this time of worship that puts us in the same place as Mary Magdelene and the other Mary, as the disciples?

It is vital, in my opinion for all Christians to find a way to embrace fully the statement, “I believe in the resurrection of Christ.” Why is it important? With all the legitimate concerns and questions raised by contemporary biblical scholarship; with all the challenges raised by modern scientific inquiry; with all the doubts raised by the Christian Church's past failures, the truth of Easter remains at the center of Christian faith.

If there is any real hope for genuine unity within the Church, you and I must find a way to believe in the resurrection of Christ. Such belief, recognizing that there will be vastly different interpretations of the events of the first Easter, is vital toward finding common ground with other Christians and to connecting with those outside Christian faith. As Christians, how can we engage people of other faith without fully embracing the deep truth of our faith.

The force that brought resurrection to Jesus brings us to a resurrection quality of life. The elemental powers of life are all moving toward a state of wholeness and connectedness that the Bible calls *Shalom*. This is far beyond how we usually understand the word peace, far beyond how we usually understand the word wholeness, far more than how you and I usually think of being One.

The divine power of *Shalom* flowed in, through, and around the person Jesus of Nazareth. We take our cue from his earliest followers, Paul and others living in the generation following Jesus' death took this message to the world. We take our cue from

those living in the generation before the gospels were written whose focus was on the living presence of the Holy Spirit in their lives. They gave virtually no attention to the historical Jesus. His was a human life through whom the full truth of eternity shone clearly –even more than they or we can hope to understand. Jesus was not God pretending to be human. He was a human being revealing God – a mysterious truth made clear with a human face.

Jesus' death was very human. We were remembering Jesus' death on Good Friday aware that our remembrance was as much about our suffering as about his. We recounted his journey to the cross. Truly, we were confessing our journey through the valley of the shadow of grief, loss, disappointment, betrayal, and anger.

The resurrection of Jesus showed people that death is not the final word. Easter is as much about our resurrection as his. It is the promise of life after death for all people; life not like this earthly life because eternity not like this life. We move into the existence of the Eternal who now surrounds us, in whose life we have always moved.

We can't imagine life other what we now know – can't grasp life that lies through that portal we call death. Yet, the resurrection story is about that life – about its meaning.

The gospel tells us that Jesus connected with his disciples after his death, finally becoming one with them in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit is in each of us, urging us to live fully. The meaning of the resurrection is not to be found in the past. The power of God is not proved or disproved by what happened to Jesus 2000 years ago. If the promise of the gospel is true, resurrection is a present reality. It is the journey of our own self-discovery and the foundation for abundant living. Resurrection is real for us today only when we are

sensitive to the unfolding of God's plan in our lives, to give free and open assent to the destiny this love is shaping for us. (John Main, *The Present Christ*)

We experience resurrection ourselves when we respond to the mystery of God's love shaping our lives. "Our response is *always* in the moment, from moment to moment." (Dewar, *Called or Collared?*) Living this way is almost never a confident or clear process, but often tenuous, halting, and painfully honest. It is also passionate.

Embracing resurrection in our lives means being in touch our deepest wants, our truest passions that lead us toward what is most real and meaningful for us. "Ignoring our wants, [means] they either find expression in destructive ways or cause us all kinds of ills and problems that make us self-centered and self-serving – the very end we are so anxious to avoid. [As a result, we can] become flat and uninteresting people. The calm and expressionless face reflects not peace at the center, but a dying going on within. For these passionless selves the words were spoken, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light". (O'Connor, *Cry Pain, Cry Hope*)

As long as we keep life at arms length, arguing or sorting out the events of the past, we insulate ourselves against the Spirit's power to transform our lives. We virtually guarantee that we will never live the abundance that Jesus taught and that he himself found.

Lots of voices speak to us today, telling us what to believe or not believe. Beyond the clearest truth of Darwin and other great scientific minds lies the truth of God. Beyond the pseudo science and shallow theology that denies what science clearly sees, lies the truth of God. This truth can only be grasped in faith, deep faith rather than intellectual belief. Without genuine faith in the resurrection of Christ as a present truth for our lives, there is no hope for deeper meaning in life.

I believe in the resurrection of Christ because there is no reasonable alternative. I believe in the resurrection of Christ because I hope for the fulfillment of this life in the life beyond death. I believe in the resurrection of Christ because I experience the living Spirit in my life today. I believe in the resurrection of Christ because I experience the living Spirit in you. I believe in the resurrection of Christ because this abiding Christ Spirit is with us in the struggles of life, in the sorrows and grief, in the confusion and loss. Because we can trust asking ourselves challenging questions about our faith and about God, that trust itself compels my trust, my faith, in resurrection.

Let us be united in heart and mind as we live in the present and shape the future. Sisters and brothers, Christ is risen and goes before us into Galilee, the Galilee of this congregation and this city. Christ waits for us in the shadowed valleys and invisible people of our daily walk. Christ lives in our efforts to live fully and lovingly in our families and friendships. Christ stands beside us in our struggles and loneliness. Christ is risen today and calls us to live the new life of resurrection that is our destiny. I believe - help me so to live. Amen.

Matthew 28: 1-10 NRSV

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, 'Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ^a ⁷Then 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.' ^b ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, 'Greetings!' And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then 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 from The Message

After the Sabbath, as the first light of the new week dawned, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to keep vigil at the tomb. Suddenly the earth reeled and rocked under their feet as God's angel came down from heaven, came right up to where they were standing. He rolled back the stone and then sat on it. Shafts of lightning blazed from him. His garments shimmered snow-white. The guards at the tomb were scared to death. They were so frightened, they couldn't move.

The angel spoke to the women: "There is nothing to fear here. I know you're looking for Jesus, the One they nailed to the cross. He is not here. He was raised, just as he said. Come and look at the place where he was placed.

"Now, get on your way quickly and tell his disciples, 'He is risen from the dead. He is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there.' That's the message."

The women, deep in wonder and full of joy, lost no time in leaving the tomb. They ran to tell the disciples. Then Jesus met them, stopping them in their tracks. "Good morning!" he said. They fell to their knees, embraced his feet, and worshiped him. Jesus said, "You're holding on to me for dear life! Don't be frightened like that. God tell my brothers that they are to go to Galilee, and that I'll meet them there."