

The Heart of Christianity

Mark 16:1-8

I remember standing in the cemetery. It was dawn on Easter Sunday. The preacher shouted, “Christ is risen!” As a child, I always looked around uneasily at all the graves around me, and I shivered and it was only partly from the early morning coolness. The idea of dead people coming back to life was a little too real for me at that point. Now I see Easter in slightly different terms – not as something to fear, but as a reality to celebrate.

The heart of Christian faith is that God raised Jesus from death. It was not the resuscitation of a dead body. Resurrection was moving beyond physical death, conquering the fear of death for all of us, and reconciling the heavenly and earthly dimensions of life – God and humanity brought together after being separated. There are two questions about Easter that stand before us and challenge our thinking. They challenge our faith.

Many people are concerned with how the resurrection happened -- how close the events of that first Easter are accurately reflected by the gospel accounts. As a child, I was focused on how the resurrection happened, especially as I was standing in that cemetery thinking about bodies coming back to life. Now I find I’m more concerned with how the Easter story affects us.

What really happened on that first Easter? The answer is that we don’t know. The Bible claims there was an empty tomb and resurrection appearances by Jesus. Women who were followers of Jesus came to the tomb at the first daylight following that Sabbath. They found a huge stone rolled away and someone who was not Jesus inside with a message for them: “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”

Matthew’s Gospel added an earthquake to Mark’s version which served to move the huge stone. The young man in the tomb became an angel. There were also guards guarding the tomb. Matthew says they were paid off to say that they had all fallen asleep and that Jesus’ disciples had taken his body. Luke’s Gospel added a second angel and had Jesus’ resurrection appearances in and around Jerusalem. John’s Gospel offers a version of the Easter story with very different details.

So, the question of what happened is hard to know. Each gospel tells a somewhat different Easter story and they cannot really be compressed into a single story. If *what happened* is the most important question for you, then the essential challenge of Easter is to believe that God literally brought Jesus’ broken body back into the physical realm. It is to believe that, in some way this gives us reason to hope that death will not have the last word in our existence.

The challenge is choose to believe that one of the Gospel narratives tells the factual account or that all tell some version based on the history. Since the empty tomb and resurrection appearances could have other explanations, the only *proof* of the resurrection is Jesus continuing existence through the Christian Church. Something happened that has had a lasting effect.

Since we cannot know the actual events on the ground in an any objective sense, I suggest that the *what happened* question is not the most important one. Choosing which Gospel to believe or deciding what really happened on the first Easter is more a faith question than an historical one. We need to focus instead on the question, “what did it mean?” I believe the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ death and resurrection, regardless of whether they are factual history or parable, are told within a theological more than historical framework. The Easter story was told to explain and assert what God was doing in response to Jesus’ death. Their truth is asserted as valid regardless of their historical accuracy.

You can believe that the event of resurrection could have been witnessed by anyone who was present or even captured by recording equipment had it been available. Or you can believe that the events might have been seeable only by true believers through eyes of faith. Or you can believe that the experience of those first disciples was more mystical and less physical than the Gospels portray. And you might find that the resurrection is meaningful primarily because of the sense of the presence of Christ with you now.

People of faith hold views on both sides of the question of what happened that first Easter -- whether the events were primarily physical and historical truth or mystical and spiritual truth. If we insist on just one interpretation as correct, and the others consequently wrong, then we will never find our way toward living in sync with the vision of *shalom* – the oneness of all of life that the Bible calls God’s kingdom.

What did Easter mean to those who first experienced Jesus’ presence after his crucifixion? The story of Jesus’ resurrection was told in the pattern of the Jewish expectation of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the age. Jesus was seen as the “first fruits” of a resurrection that would include all people (1 Cor. 15). Ancient Christian tradition has the risen Christ pictured leading souls out of the land of death. The meaning is pretty clear that, in Jesus, a “new heaven and a new earth” have already begun to come into being. The transformation has begun to take place as “the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ.” This alternative and counter-cultural kingdom is present in Jesus – and Jesus was passionate about its coming – and it becomes more present as we follow Jesus’ way.

What does Easter mean for us? It means to live the reality of the Kingdom of God today. It means to be awake to the reality of the God-presence in and around us. It means to be awake to that presence and probably live with greater personal integrity, with more truth-telling and less manipulating, and with more compassionate -- seeing and responding more quickly to the needs of others around us. It probably means to be less fearful and more invested in realizing our own potential as human beings. At the same time, we will probably be quicker to recognize and affirm the God-presence in others.

The meaning of Easter for us is how we live our lives each day: how we treat others and embrace the best in ourselves. But there is another dimension of resurrection reality that challenges us. It is the call to work to change oppressive systems, relational systems in society, industry, and religion that result in fostering dependence rather than freedom, despair rather than possibility, and scarcity rather than abundance. We have the opportunity and the task to partner with God in creating a new earth. It includes a transformation within ourselves, in our

relationships with others, and in our commitment to bring greater health to the ways we live together with all people.

A familiar image Jesus used to illustrate life in God is taken from agriculture. Our lives can be like dry and hard ground. The seed of the Spirit planted in us cannot go deeply to the core of our lives. It cannot come to life in our lives. Our lives can also be like soft, receptive, and fertile earth where the Spirit finds space and nutrition to grow and bear fruit. Our lives can also be like a seed that has the potential to live, grow, and enrich the world. Jesus said the seed only grows when it falls to the ground and dies. The rhythm of life that Jesus taught by word and example is the rhythm of Good Friday moving to Easter Sunday, from death to new life.

However we understand or choose to interpret the nature of what happened that first Easter morning, it is absolutely crucial we live the meaning of Easter each day the way Jesus lived. Let us be inspired by Jesus' passion for justice, mercy, and compassion. Let us dare to challenge the oppressive forces in our world. Jesus invited all people, including you and me, to find and follow our deepest passions – to give our lives away in faith and seek to know the mystical presence of God intimately and personally. Let us choose to share the seeds of God's love all who will receive them. Let those seeds be planted within us and grow in such a way that we will help transform the world in Jesus' name.

Christ is risen and goes before us into a hurting world. Christ is risen and born anew in your life and mine – risen in you to love the world in the power of the living Christ.