

## Can You Believe It?

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Last week was such a wonderful Sunday! Everyone who participated in worship did such a great job, the music was spectacular, the sanctuary looked and smelled great with the Easter flowers, and we proclaimed together the joyous phrase "Christ is risen!" What a great Sunday it was! Today is still Easter too. Just like Christmas usually tends to be the shopping season, Christmas Day, then done; Easter feels like that too in a way. We have our 40 day season of Lent to prepare, Palm Sunday, Holy Week, it's here and then it's gone. I've said before, I'll say it again, it's still Easter today! The resurrection of Jesus is not just a historical event bound by time; instead the resurrection is a divine experience of new life. In fact, the Easter season lasts for 50 days, until the 50<sup>th</sup> day, which is Pentecost, the promised coming of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples.

Now, what do we do this morning? I mean look around. It doesn't really feel like Easter anymore. There are some signs left, but not many. The paraments are white, the Christ candle is burning, we sang another alleluia, but it doesn't really feel like Easter. Last week was our Super Bowl! What do we do now? What do we do when the flowers are gone, the trumpeters have gone home, and the crowds have left? Is it harder to believe and proclaim that Christ is risen this morning? Today is still Easter.

Can you believe it? I mean last Sunday we proclaimed that Christ is risen, but can you believe that Jesus was raised to new life? I didn't ask if you understand it, but can you believe it? It's a hard thing to understand and maybe it's impossible. I mean we go from Jesus teaching, healing, and loving to Good Friday and torture, crucifixion, and death. Jesus' body is laid in a burial tomb, then his body is gone, but it's not a physical body, right? In the Gospel of John we're told that the disciples are behind locked doors, yet Jesus somehow entered the house, twice. In the Gospel of Luke, the disciples think they see a ghost, yet Jesus says "a ghost does not have flesh and bones." Jesus showed them his hands and his side and Thomas touched his wounded body. Then the resurrected Lord sits down and eats fish with the disciples. After forty days, Luke tells us he ascends into heaven. So, when it comes to the resurrection, let's just say, it's complicated. It seems unbelievable, but "Can you believe it?"

Our faith is centered on the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus is absolutely essential to our faith as Christians. Bishop Scott Jones wrote, "All of Christianity hangs upon this one piece of information; the resurrection." Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." It's essential to our faith.

Just after the resurrection, Jesus' followers are behind closed and locked doors in Jerusalem. Professor Tom Long from Duke wrote that if the disciples were going to set up a church in Jerusalem, their church sign would have read: "First Church of Jerusalem: Locked doors, no welcome. The church of the sweaty palms and shaky knees. The church of the firmly bolted door." They were afraid, that's true. The Gospel writer, John, tells us that they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. That's reasonable, the fear that is. Fear can force our minds into all kinds of unreasonable possibilities, but what were they really afraid of? Author Anna Carter Florence wrote that "John says that the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, but I wonder about that. I wonder if the doors were locked for fear of the resurrection." It's an unbelievable claim yes, but it's a claim that begs for a response. Did the

disciples think, "Oh my it's true, Jesus was right, what's next?" That would have probably been more frightening than the Jewish leaders.

Guess who showed up in that locked house? Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" He showed them his hands and side and we're told that they were overjoyed when they saw him. But not all of the disciples were there to witness the resurrected Jesus hanging out. Thomas was not with them when the risen Lord showed up, so when the disciples told him "We have seen the Lord!" Thomas was like "yeah right, unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Have you ever felt like Thomas? Have you ever heard the phrase "Christ is risen!" and thought, unless I see it or experience it or have it explained in a logical way, then I won't believe it. He's often called doubting Thomas, but he did say, "I won't believe unless." Unless I see it for myself, I won't believe. He needed something more than just the disciple's word. He needed to experience the resurrection. And sure enough, who shows up? The resurrected Jesus. What does Thomas see? Resurrection before his very eyes.

Our retired Bishop from Indiana, Mike Coyner, tells about a professor he had in seminary who said to future pastors, "Don't try to explain Easter, it is a mystery. Don't try to prove Easter, it cheapens the experience. Just proclaim Easter and repeat the ancient affirmation: Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed." It's true; I can't prove it or even explain it. Resurrection is not resuscitation, it's new life, God making all things new. It's not that a dead body just came back to life to die again, resurrection is a transformed body. Even so, I can't fully explain Jesus rising from the dead. And maybe we never can, as we're only humans seeking something beyond our capability.

Even in the midst of this mystery, we can proclaim the hope that in some mysterious way the story does not end in death on the cross and in sin and evil. Sunday is always coming! God makes all things new and defeats death by bringing Jesus to new life. And we can live that promise too. There's something powerful about a group of believers living the resurrection, not trying to explain the mystery, but trying to live the mystery. The early church we are told in Acts lived the mystery of the resurrection. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. And God's grace was so powerfully at work in them that everyone was taken care of. This is the power of the resurrection at work.

Can you believe what we proclaimed last week and again this morning that Christ is risen? Then we are to prove it, not by trying to explain away the mystery, but by living in the power of Christ Jesus. Live a life of faith, seeing opportunities to bring resurrection, for new life in places of brokenness and death, for we are to be Easter people. Bishop Coyner once wrote, "We are called to be the living proof of Easter. We are called to demonstrate to a doubting world that Easter is real. The proof of Easter is not the empty tomb, or even the appearances of the risen Christ (notice how often the Bible tells us that some still doubted even when they saw Jesus). No, the real proof of Easter is in the transformed lives of the followers of Jesus." He ends by asking, "Do you believe Easter is real? Then prove it by the way you live as a follower of the Risen Christ."

There have been times for all of us where we have told God, "I won't believe unless." Sometimes I have said unless you get me through this tough time, unless you help me with this or that, "unless I see the nail

marks in his hands and put my fingers where the nails were, and put my hands into his side, I will not believe." And every time I feel like that, new life spring up and I see things differently. The resurrection happens in big ways and small. It's as big as new life and as small as a leaf. Martin Luther once wrote, "Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime." In our year of seasons, we see death in the fall and resurrection in the spring. Every day, we see the ending of the day and in the morning we welcome the newness of the day. I don't have to explain the resurrection to you, that's not possible, but I can show you, all around you and within you, the Spirit of the living Christ breathing and moving and bringing beauty, hope, and resurrection into all things. I can tell you about resurrection in a man I knew battling addiction and finding freedom; in a young person who was lost and found a vocation; in a marriage that found new life; in people who found new meaning and purpose in serving. Resurrection happens every day if we just look for the invitation from Jesus. Easter is really an invitation, as NT Wright said, "The message of Easter is that God's new world has been unveiled in Jesus Christ and that you're now invited to belong to it." You and I are invited to bring resurrection, new life into all things.

Maybe I have been asking the wrong question this morning. I have asked you too many times if you believe the resurrection, while a better question might be "Where do you see it? Where do you see new life springing up?" The great spiritual writer Henri Nouwen wrote, "The beautiful smiles on the faces of the poor of Bolivia, Peru, Nepal, Pakistan, Guatemala, and all over the planet, offer glimpses of the reality of the resurrection. These smiles come from the depth of hearts that know of a love that is real and everlasting. The words 'He has risen' were not shouted from the rooftops or carried around the city on big placards. They were whispered from ear to ear as an intimate message that could be truly heard and understood only by a heart that had been yearning for the coming of the kingdom." Now that we have proclaimed the resurrection, we are called to whisper it's message of hope from ear to ear, but that will be next Sunday's message.

For now, may we believe in the resurrection and look for it everywhere we go this week. I'm not going to ask you to give your full explanation of Easter now, that's not the point. Jesus' resurrection is a great mystery, one to be lived in this life and the next. Can you proclaim it with me? Christ is risen! Please say, "He is risen indeed!" Then prove it with your lives, because Christ is risen in you and Christ is risen in this world bringing new life to everyone and everywhere!

Let us pray:

Holy God, we boldly claimed last Sunday that Christ is risen. We have gathered this morning to make this claim and proclamation once more, but like Thomas, we bring our doubts and questions with us. We desire proof and explanations to the unexplainable mystery that is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus. Just as you did not leave Thomas to his unbelief, open our eyes to the richness of your new life all around us, in the smallest leaf to transformed and new life in you. Renew us, Lord, transform us, and resurrect us in the power and name of our risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen.