

## Sermon

April 9, 2023 [Gospel: Matthew 28:1-10 ]

*The Mystery of the Resurrection*

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Grace to you, and peace, from God, the source of life, and from Jesus, God's son, who is that life in this world. Amen.

It's a question I've been asking for several months now: When it comes to the resurrection, what difference does it make?

What difference does it make? I mean, you just heard the story right? How the women following Jesus discovered the empty tomb, the implication of which being that God raised Jesus from the dead, but what honest-to-goodness difference does the resurrection make? Or what difference *might* it make in our daily lives, in the life of our church, and or in the world around us? Is it simply an article of faith, a belief we can either accept or reject? Or is there something more to it, something that continues among us even as I speak?

When it comes to the resurrection, what difference does it make?

Now, we're probably not used to asking what difference, if any, the resurrection makes in our daily lives, are we? That's because we — and I include myself here — have arguably been *conditioned* to think of the resurrection as a one-time event, something that happened 2000 years ago to the physical body of Jesus. God, as it were, raised Him from the dead; God resuscitated his corpse, and *our* task, our job, is simply to believe that God could accomplish such a miraculous feat. After all, as Jesus says in the Gospel of Matthew, "With God, all things are possible." God, it would seem, can do anything.

But don't you think there's something more to the resurrection? I do. But to access this "something more," I believe we have to change the question. Instead of asking whether we *believe* in the resurrection, we need to ask, as I now have, *what difference does it make* or what difference *might* it make in our otherwise ordinary, everyday lives? In so doing, we open ourselves up to a whole new way of experiencing His living presence in the here and now, within us, among us, and all around us.

When we "look for the resurrection," to borrow the words of the Nicene Creed, the past becomes present, and the present can shape our future.

Now a moment ago, I said we, myself included, have been conditioned to think of the resurrection as a single occurrence that took place once-upon-a-time in the relatively not-so-distant past. Something that happened to the body of Jesus; His tomb was empty.

Our task as Christians, in turn, was to believe accordingly, that God raised Him from the dead; that God can do anything. No further action is necessary or required, for, as the Apostle Paul says in Romans 10, "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be raised." *Belief*

is all, it would seem, that matters – belief that he was bodily resuscitated, and his tomb was empty.

Taking its cue ostensibly from the Apostle Paul, Western Christianity – by which I mean European Christianity originating in the Latin-speaking portion of the Western Roman Empire – Western Christianity has since reduced the *general* resurrection of the dead, that is to say, the belief that *all people* will be raised, of which Jesus here was the first fruits, to the *individual ascension* of Jesus.

We have evidence for this in artwork dating back to the fifth century. The New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan explains: “From 400 onwards,” he writes, “Western Christianity has spoken of the Easter event as the resurrection of Jesus, but its iconic graphic tradition – that is to say, the artwork in our churches – has consistently depicted the resurrection of Jesus as the *ascension* of Jesus, emerging alone from, and hovering alone above, an empty tomb.”

I think here of a famous portrait of the crucifixion, painted by an early 16<sup>th</sup>-century artist named Mateus or Matthias Gruenewald. In it, you see Jesus crucified in a grotesque, exaggerated way. To his right, in a triptych, you see his resurrection, which again, here is simply Jesus alone, hovering above his empty grave.

This is why I said Western Christians have been conditioned to think of the resurrection as something that happened to Jesus alone, the implication being – and this is the point I want to make – that it has no relevance to our daily lives. *No relevance to our daily lives*. It belongs to the past, take it or leave it.

(Wouldn't it be interesting if I just said “Amen” and walked off now? Never came back? )

Let me offer you here one quick modern example of how Western Christianity has reduced the resurrection to an article of faith or a matter of belief. In 1910, the Northern Presbyterian church (now the PCUSA) identified Five Fundamentals, or articles of faith, one must believe in order to properly and truly be a Christian. Five. The movement following became known as “Christian Fundamentalism.”

Today, most people associate Christian Fundamentalism with the belief in the inerrancy of Scripture, which is to say that scripture God breathed is without error. Why? Because God wrote it. This, indeed, is the first of the five fundamentals. Fewer people know, however, that of the remaining four articles of faith, belief in a bodily resurrection of Jesus was, and is, essential to being a “true Christian.”

Now I'm not interested in debating whether dead men can walk. I prefer to bracket that question and leave it perhaps for you to decide. What concerns me this morning is *what we lose*. What we lose when we reduce the resurrection to a belief simply and solely regarding what happened to the physical body of Jesus Christ.

Here's why. The stories we have about the resurrection in the New Testament show that His early followers experienced His risen presence *in a variety of ways*. I think, for

example, of the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, according to Luke 24: it's there that these disciples experienced the risen presence of Christ, when they break bread together in his name.

That's clearly a different experience than the empty tomb, about which we heard this morning. This variety of ways, in turn, changed the lives of people living throughout Roman-occupied Judea. It gave them hope in the face of loss.

How do I know this? I simply change the question from whether they merely "believed in the resurrection" to "what difference it made in their lives." Again, just changing the question from whether they merely believed in the resurrection, to what difference it actually made in their lives.

I then – and this is usually a mistake – posted the question on Facebook, to a ragtag group of theological misfits who identify themselves as "radical Christians," and the answers I received were astounding. Listen closely.

"The resurrection not only provides hope in the face of loss," one said, "it inspires revolutionary optimism; in fact, it *is* revolutionary optimism. You can kill a revolutionary," she explained, "but you cannot kill a revolution. The proof of that is here. Now. The fact that we gather in His name."

"The resurrection," another person said, "is nonviolent insurrection. Pilate's official seal was on the stone before the tomb, and Pilate decreed it was not to be moved – but it was moved. Thus," this person says, "the resurrection was an act of *civil disobedience* against Rome that spread like wildfire across the ancient Near East. It was God's middle finger to power, the culmination of the upside-down Kingdom Jesus had been preaching since the beginning of his public ministry, according to Matthew and Mark."

Imagine, therefore, the difference this new way of life – this middle finger to Rome, one that Rome could not snuff out, even in the crucifixion of Jesus – would make in the lives of the poor, the lives of the outcast, the lives of the marginalized, a difference His followers would live out and practice by sharing their property in common (Acts 2), by welcoming people irrespective of their social status to the Lord's Supper, (First Corinthians 11), and by absolving, or destabilizing, hierarchical distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female (Galatians 3) as fundamental to their life together.

Does this not sound like a revolution? Does this not make Jesus himself a *revolutionary*? A man who disrupted existing social relations by incarnating a new way of life! A new way of life before God and neighbor that even Rome could not stop by executing him. Should we not accordingly rename the New Testament, "The Communist Mani-Christo?!"

Well, that may be a stretch; but we do know this: Many of Jesus's followers, including the author of Colossians, our second reading for today, understood the resurrection as a new way of life that actually made a difference to those formerly regarded as misfits

and outcasts. It was an emerging transformation of society that came about all across the ancient Mediterranean world in tiny house churches where all people were one as the Risen Body of Christ, that is the community of faith that grew out of his death.

It should be clear, therefore, that the resurrection was more than something that happened to Jesus's physical body. It was a new way of life that became manifest in the earliest of Christian communities, the kind that made a real difference in the lives of his followers, who regarded themselves as "one in the body of Christ", which is to say, the church.

But there was still more to it, wasn't there? Was it not also the power of transformation and renewal – the kind that the prophet Jeremiah anticipated in our first reading – that swept through the churches of Asia Minor, enabling people like the Apostle Paul to say, even in the face of death, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"?

The theologian Dorothy Zola thinks so. She talks of Christ as "the mysterious power which was in Jesus, and which continues on in us, and sometimes makes us into fools in Christ, who, without hope of success, and without objective or goal, share their life with others."

Now, I think of this during the week, when, thanks to your generosity, I am able to provide funding for people who are either short on food or close to being evicted. This past week was a record in my six-plus years of being here. We had more requests for financial assistance due to potential evictions than any other I've experienced. Sometimes, when people come to me and I give them money on your behalf. they say to me, "Well, this is a loan." Or they'll say to me, "I can clean things around the church," and I say, "Absolutely not. This is a gift. There are no strings attached. Sure, we'd love to see you at a Sunday service. But there's nothing you have to do to respond or reciprocate."

In these instances, I think of what it means to "be a fool in Christ." To share life with others without an ulterior motive, without the hope of success, or just to do it because it's right. There is, we might say, something of Christ in living for others, in standing up for others, a power which could not and cannot be destroyed, a contagious power that appears in the midst of defeat and despair.

Now, I don't know about you, but I want to experience this power, the living Christ. I want transformation and renewal for my life, but not only for me, I want transformation and renewal for *you* and for *us* as a congregation. But the only way to get there, I believe, is to let the Holy Spirit change our way of seeing.

Several weeks ago, I talked about how more than a couple people told me the closure of our congregation in two to five years is a foregone conclusion; that we will dry up. That may be true, I reply, for those of us who cannot look beyond the cross, who cannot see beyond the possibilities of defeat and failure. And that was certainly how Jesus's followers felt after he died.

Yet, unlike them, we *know* what Paul Harvey would call “the rest of the story.” We know how the story ends! We know that death did not have the last word, which again is why the Nicene Creed invites us not simply to *believe* in the resurrection, but to “*look* for the resurrection,” not only in “every leaf of springtime,” as Martin Luther beautifully puts it, but in the possibilities for renewal and transformation, even within these four walls.

Christ is here! Christ is among us! He is risen! Think about what might happen, if, rather than expecting death and closure, we expected *transformation and new life*.

That, my friends, is faith. It’s trusting in the promise of the resurrection. God had something more in store for the early followers of Jesus, and God has something more in store for us, too.

It’s a question I’ve been asking now for several months: When it comes to the resurrection, what difference does it make, or might it make, in my life? And the answer I now have is this: It gives me hope in the power of renewal, that even when things seem dire, even on the other side of great loss, circumstances can change. The last thing the followers of Jesus expected was to experience his living presence on the other side of his horrific, awful execution. And yet, look what happened! It excites me! It gives me hope! It makes a difference! With the help of the Holy Spirit I expect, now, the unexpected.

And so, I turn the question back to you. When it comes to the resurrection, what difference does it make, or might it make, in *your* life? And what difference might it make in *our* life as a church?

And Jesus said, Amen.