

The Rev. Sharon A. Benton

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2004

Living the Resurrection Question
Matthew 28:1-10

“The resurrection of Jesus is an affront to many scientifically trained minds.”ⁱ So begins Douglas Ware’s commentary on today’s scripture passage from Matthew. Not the most reassuring way to start an Easter conversation. But there it is. And Ware continues probing the problem of this story in judicial language.

It must be conceded from the outset that, conceived as a matter to be submitted to a jury, the case is seriously flawed...

Ladies and gentlemen of the jury: The discrepancies in the story as submitted by the four Evangelists are substantial. *Who* first discovered that the tomb was empty? When? How and when was the stone rolled from the mouth of the tomb? [You must admit, these are some powerful arguments.]

...But then, these same factors have been used by the “defense lawyers” to support *their* argument.

Good people of the court: the earliest Christians cannot have conspired to create the legend out of nothing; in this case they would have made certain that their testimonies agreed. Indeed, variations in other stories about Jesus demonstrate that early Christians were not terribly concerned about the accuracy of detail.

Unfortunately this argument does not impress the jury.

And so, the “prosecution” asks: Regardless of the disagreements, is there any truth in the underlying story that the tomb was found to be empty?ⁱⁱ

That, my friends, is the Resurrection Question.

Some of you may have noticed the similarity between this morning’s sermon title – Living the Resurrection Question – and the title of the study series that Hal and I have been leading throughout Lent.

“Living the Questions” is a DVD-based spiritual discussion series. Each of its 12 sessions presents the question of some significant aspect of the Christian faith how we read and understand the Bible, the ways and purposes of prayer, the problem of suffering – and then leaves you with those questions. No answers, only continued thoughtful dialogue.

So, with Douglas Hare I ask this question:

What is the underlying truth in the story of the Resurrection?

What *is* Resurrection? What do we think about it? *Do* we think about it? Is it, as for some, such an affront to our world of logic and intellect that we enjoy the bonnets and butterflies of the day, but set aside really thinking about this central facet of our faith?

Because it *is* central. In fact, without resurrection, the Christian Church would not have appeared at all. The disciples had run, (you’ll remember) denied, hidden themselves away. They doubted their faith and their ability to follow this man who had died for them. They were lost without their guide. Until Jesus returned to commission then into the world, they didn’t know what to do.

So, in the most basic sense, resurrection is the center of our faith – and thus the reason Easter is such a big day.

Okay – so if the question is answered so simply – resurrection is the heart of Christianity, the reason we are all here this morning (and *any* Sunday morning), and the basis for the church’s existence at all – and if we all agree here... Then I can sit down!

Ahh, but it is really that easy? *Yes*. It is.

And yet, we still struggle with the question.

Within these walls right now we have many different understandings about Jesus’ resurrection on that day so many years ago.

- Some of us view the resurrection of Jesus as the literal, *physical* rising up of his body.
- Others of us understand resurrection to be the return of a person’s spirit, Jesus’ spirit, in whatever form he might have taken, (since he seemed unrecognizable in so many instances).
- For yet others here today, Jesus’ resurrection is a metaphor for his continued life, through his teachings and his disciples – and in turn through us.
- For me, as for many of you, my beliefs change moment to moment – flowing from one to another of these theories – depending on my thoughts and senses at the time.
- And a few of us may have as yet been *unable* to engage the question at all because of what we have been taught – that it’s not okay to entertain anything but the traditional view of the story.

But even Matthew has more than one way of conceiving the reality of the resurrection. Just as this morning’s text reveals Jesus’ physicality in the women’s grasping of his feet, the final verse of the Gospel presents a picture of the risen Christ as a spiritual presence “through all the ages.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Have you ever noticed that *all* of the Gospels tell of the empty tomb. And *all* of the Evangelists relate the appearance of the Risen Jesus. But NOT ONE of them actually describes the resurrection EVENT itself. ... They leave us with the questions. {{Isn’t that great!}}

No! It’s infuriating! We don’t like to be left with questions! It’s against our cultural nature. When novels or movies try to leave us with a mystery at the end, we feel as though we’ve been tricked. We want those loose ends neatly tied up ... because, of course, that’s the way life really works. This past week I had been telling people that I was unable to begin preparation of this particular sermon because of the weather. The low-lying clouds and general gray days brought on a heaviness that I felt kept me from concentrating on the “Easter joy” that I was *supposed* to feel.

The weather may have helped dampen my spirits a bit – but so might the *News* have been a factor. Like you, I woke up on Palm Sunday to the reality that our government bodies were discussing the fate of Terry Schiavo – a woman with severe brain damage whose life or death was enough of a national event to extend procedures with a special, Sunday-night session of Congress. I wonder how it would have turned out if Jeff Weise’s life or death had been so high in our nation’s concern on Sunday? Because it was Jeff’s story, and the deaths of so many around him, that caught my attention on Monday, as he left his school and community bereft and confused by his shooting.

This Holy Week, as every week, I was forced to recognize the great pain and suffering that continues in our world, not only through Good Friday and Easter Saturday, but even today, on

Easter Morning. The women who came to the tomb, in whichever Gospel you read it, are grieving.

And so I struggled to find words for this particular Sunday. The loose ends were still loose. And the questions linger.



But it doesn't end there. It can't, because even in the questions and loose ends, the women left the tomb carrying with them both fear *and joy*.

And in these seemingly contrasting emotions, in their holding of apparent contradiction, they were already bearing witness to Jesus' resurrection. ... They knew hope.

What is the underlying truth in the story of Jesus' resurrection?

Jesus died.

I don't believe that Jesus' resurrection *negated* his death –

just as resurrection won't negate the reality of death and pain all around us.

The contrast of life and death, joy and fear, is duality, and duality is false understanding of our world. Jesus' death and resurrection broke down that *either-or* dynamic: you either live or you die. We live with death always – but we can also rise up from it – always.

Jesus died ... and yet he has life.

The clouds are oppressive ... and yet the sun shines.

It may be Easter Sunday 2005, and yet Easter has *already* happened, once 2000-some years ago and then over and over again – not only as Christ's self, but in *your* resurrection, and in *my* resurrection.

When we hold onto resurrection hope,

people in the midst of struggle can heal.

When we hold onto resurrection hope,

children and families of violence can heal.

When we hold onto resurrection hope,

we are resurrecting Christ and ourselves.

And it is when we *cannot* hope,

that others are resurrecting hope *for* us.

It is when we can no longer hope,

that God is resurrecting Christ for us.

Resurrection *is*.

We live it. As Christ's people we are called to rise up. Be not afraid.

Ask the questions. Bear witness to the resurrection.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

ⁱ Douglas R.A. Hare, "Matthew", *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Achtemeier (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993) 327.

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Hare 328. The actual quote is as follows: "It must be conceded from the outset that, conceived as a matter to be submitted to a jury, the case is seriously flawed. The discrepancies in the story as submitted by the four Evangelists are substantial. Who first discovered that the tomb was empty? When? How and when was the stone rolled from the mouth of the tomb? ... These same factors have been used by the "defense lawyers" to support the argument that the earliest Christians cannot have conspired to create the legend out of nothing; in this case they would have made certain that their testimonies agreed. Unfortunately this argument does not impress the jury. Variations in other stories about Jesus demonstrate that early Christians were not terribly concerned about the accuracy of detail. The "prosecution" asks: Regardless of the disagreements, is there any truth in the underlying story that the tomb was found to be empty?"

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Matthew 28:20