

Christ is Risen! So What?

1 Cor. 15:12-20

John 20:1-18

We call the message of the Christian faith “the Gospel,” which comes from the Old English word “Godspell,” which means, “Good News.” And there is a lot of Good News in our message:

- You are not an accident. God had you in God’s plans from the very beginning;
- We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, not by our own achievement, not by how good a person we are;
- God loves each one of us. He forgives our sins through Jesus’ death on the cross, he teaches us in the Bible how to live by the law of love.

Lots of Good News, but the best news of all is reserved for today. Although the powers of this world, the powers of darkness and evil killed Jesus on an instrument of torture reserved for the worst of criminals, Jesus did not remain dead. On the third day, Jesus was alive again, conquering death by death and opening the door to eternal life.

And yet, this last bit of Good News seems to be the hardest for more and more folks to believe. A growing number of people who call themselves Christians draw the line here.

- Born to Joseph and Mary – check, although that whole virgin birth thing is highly doubtful;
- Grew up to be a wandering rabbi who taught some pretty amazing ideas – check, although again, that whole love your enemies and turn the other cheek thing presents some problems
- Became so popular that he began to be a threat to the Romans and the Jewish leaders who lived in the Romans’ pocket – check;
- Was crucified, nailed to a cross, and died a long, agonizing death – check.

But that whole empty tomb, coming back to life thing...well, here, let me read to you how one of today’s best known scholars describes what he thinks really happened.

One night in the early fall, Simon and his mates had a particularly good catch. They were happy as they dragged the fish ashore. They built a fire, placed some of the catch on the grill, brought out the bread from the boat, and prepared to feast. As was his custom, Simon took the bread, said the ceremonial blessing, broke and distributed it. In his blessing, he likened the bread to Jesus’ broken body. Both, he said, were meant to give life.

Then it happened. A light went on in Simon’s head. It was as if the heavens opened and so did Simon’s eyes, and Simon stared into the realm of God. There he saw Jesus as part of God’s being and God’s meaning. It was not delusional. Death could not destroy the one who made God known. “Death cannot contain him. I have seen the Lord!” was Simon’s ecstatic exclamation. Then Simon opened the eyes of the others to what he saw. Each of them grasped this vision, experienced Jesus alive, and were themselves resurrected. That was Easter.¹

In other words, Easter never really happened, except in the minds of Simon Peter and the other disciples. That is the view held by John Shelby Spong, an Episcopal bishop, whose life is dedicated to the task of reinterpreting the entire Christian faith so that it doesn’t have to be a challenge to believe it. He speaks for a growing number of folks who would like to take “faith” out of the faith. He, along with others like him, like to say that we are much too enlightened these days to be expected to really buy that idea that Jesus was dead on Friday and eating fish on Sunday. So, he and they insist that all this resurrection talk is internal, subjective, that Easter is something we experience, not external, historical, objective fact. Jesus wasn’t really physically raised from the dead; something primitive, uneducated 1st century people might have fallen for, but we much more evolved 21st century folk cannot really be expected to buy it. In fact, Spong calls everyone who believes in the idea of a bodily resurrection a “fundamentalist.” There is no middle ground, you can’t be a thinking Christian and believe in Easter; you have to be someone who turns their brain off when they enter the sanctuary and blindly accepts what anyone with half a working brain can see couldn’t possibly be true. You either agree with him or you are a fundamentalist. He, and they, make it seem that this is a new idea.

¹ Spong, John Shelby. “The Easter Moment – Drawing Conclusions,” quoted in Thomas G. Long, Preaching from Memory to Hope. Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, p. 74.

But Easter as a made up story is not a new idea that evolved 21st century thinkers came up with. In fact, we hear Paul addressing just that idea in his letter to the Corinthians.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? You see? People have been trying to explain away Easter for about 2000 years – not just people – Christian people. They were doing it in Corinth 20 or 30 years after it happened. But, here's the problem: get rid of the resurrection of Jesus and the entire house comes crashing down.

First, our entire faith becomes a lie. Taking out the bodily resurrection of Jesus from our faith is like taking the foundation out from under a house and expecting the house to remain standing. *We are even found to be misrepresenting God, says Paul. In other words, we are lying about God if Easter didn't really happen.*

Second, if Jesus wasn't raised, our faith is futile. The translation called "The Message" puts it clearly: *if Christ weren't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever.* An internal, subjective view of Jesus' resurrection leads to an internal, subjective religion. It is Jesus' bodily resurrection that leads us to care about the physical needs of those around us, to work for justice, to care about civil rights and starving children and sitting beside the bed of a dying hospice patient. It is Jesus' bodily resurrection that leads us to care about this physical world, about the environment. Jesus' bodily resurrection shows he cares about this physical world, and wants us to care about it, too. A spiritualized resurrection leads to a spiritualized religion where this world isn't really important.

Finally, as Paul so beautifully puts it, *"If for this life only we have believed in Christ, we are, of all people, most to be pitied."* See, Jesus' entire teaching on how to live in this life is based on something more beyond this life. Do you really want to turn the other cheek if you're not hoping for a resurrection life where everything is different from the way it is now? Do you really want to love your enemies if this world's rules are the only ones anyone will ever live by? What's the point of living as a servant if you are not living today by the rules of another kingdom, a resurrection reign in which a new heaven and a new earth will replace this one.

Jesus' resurrection is not just about us going to heaven when we die, it is his victory over death that one day will lead to a new heaven and a new earth – a physical earth – in which death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the former things will have passed away.

That is the "so what" of Easter, of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It isn't the final, ultimate event in God's plan, it is the penultimate event that opens the way to the final, ultimate event: a new world in which heaven and earth are restored and in which God's will is done for all eternity.

And that is why we celebrate on this Easter morning with the words Christians have been proclaiming for two thousand years:

Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!