

Warning: Christ is Alive!

A sermon preached in Glebe Road United Church

Easter Sunday

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Luke 24: 1-12

The Easter story of new life emerging out of violent death has been a major stumbling block for Christians since the very beginning. It is not only we modern, sceptical people who have trouble with this story. In Luke's version of the Resurrection that I have just read the women come to the disciples to tell them the news of the empty tomb but the disciples do not believe them. They think that it is an "idle tale" told by distraught, hysterical women; it could not possibly be true. So if the disciples can have doubts with the actual tomb just down the road and they became the leaders of the new church, surely it is ok for us twenty centuries later to have our doubts too. Unfortunately, the church in our day doesn't tolerate these doubts very well. We are told that if we want to be Christian then we must put aside our doubts and believe everything that is written in our scriptures, especially the story of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote that if Christ be not raised then our entire faith must be wrong. So we have to silence our doubts, hold our breath, clench our fists, close our eyes and just believe.

How is that working for you? How can we believe something that is not testable or repeatable, that violates all our experience of death and loss. This morning I would like you to give yourself permission to entertain these doubts, to hold them up to the light. I would like you to look carefully at the stories in the gospels as they are actually written and see if they are any help.

Let's begin by looking at the whole experience of the crucifixion from the perspective of the disciples. These were Jesus' friends, the closest companions he had during his ministry. They had seen him die. The Romans used crucifixion as an instrument of terror against their opponents. To see someone you know and love die like that must have been horrible. The Crucifixion would have traumatized them. Remember that the disciples were in real danger themselves that first Good Friday. Peter was challenged by different bystanders (Luke 24: 54-62) "Surely, you are one of his disciples", the servant girl had said to Peter that fateful night. "I am not", Peter maintained, as he, with increasing vehemence denied three times ever knowing Jesus before the cock crowed. After the crucifixion the disciples must have fled in terror for their very lives. And now, on that first Easter morning, they were in hiding, staying with trusted friends, out of sight. In a day or so, the Passover would be over, and they could try to disappear; melt into the crowds leaving the city for home. Luke writes that when Peter heard the news of the empty tomb he got up and ran to see for himself; and in John's rendition of the story, both Peter and John risk being apprehended by leaving their hiding places and running to the tomb that first Easter morning. I confess that I don't believe that part of the story at all. I suspect that the gospel writers have added these details to make the disciples look good. If I had been one of the disciples, nothing would have made me leave the safety of my hiding place. The crucifixion had made them scared rabbits, gone to ground, praying that they would not be discovered or betrayed to the authorities.

In our position of safety two thousand years later we read these stories without the terror and the trauma that the disciples had experienced. And as we do, we discover that the stories were not written to be very convincing because the gospel reports rarely agree on the details of what exactly happened that first Easter morning. All four gospels agree that maintain that they did go to the tomb that morning, and all but Mark agree that reported what they saw to the disciples. Exactly what they did see however, is in dispute: Mark says they saw a man in a white robe; Matthew claims that a great earthquake was felt and an angel of the Lord rolled back the stone and then spoke to the women; Luke reports that there were two men in dazzling clothes, but no earthquake; and John does not mention either men or angels but says that Jesus himself appeared to Mary Magdelene. Matthew does not have Jesus at the tomb but on the road confronting the women as they fled the area.

In our day we modern people become very suspicious of these obvious inconsistencies. And many of us also come to the conclusion that the whole story really is “an idle tale” told by the early church to inspire belief. The theory goes that the disciples invented the resurrection story to recruit people to their cause. Certainly it worked. The church did grow as it never would have if its leader had died like everyone else. It’s a good bet that without the resurrection we would never have heard of Jesus of Nazareth. But there is a problem with this theory that we in the comfort of our twenty-first century lives tend to miss. And the problem is this: Why would the disciples or anyone else invent a story that put them squarely back in the cross-hairs of the authorities again. Look at Simon Peter for example. Along with all the other disciples he ran away and deserted his Lord when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Later, he denied that he knew Jesus or had any connection with him on three separate occasions. Such a cowardly, self-centred person would want nothing more than to forget about the last three years that he had followed Jesus as a disciple, go back to his fishing boat in Galilee and hope to live out a long, inconspicuous, uneventful life. Of course Peter did not get his wish. After the events of Easter he became a leader of the early church and was eventually crucified for his troubles just as his master was.

So, was Jesus of Nazareth actually raised by God from the dead? Did he appear to Mary Magdelene in the garden, and later to the disciples, passing through locked doors to confront them in the Upper Room? Did he walk with two of them to the town of Emmaus, opening the scriptures to them without being identified until he broke bread with them late that night? I don’t know. I wasn’t there. But it is very clear to me that something must have happened to the disciples on Easter Sunday and in the days immediately following because they went from being a warren of frightened rabbits to group of fearless apostles, willing to take on the same authorities that killed their Lord for the sake of his gospel, knowing that they would very likely suffer the same fate. Ask yourself: What would it take for you to put your life on the line in that way? As for me, I think I would need to experience a love stronger than death, some reassurance that I now risked death by crucifixion, a power for life was behind me that was stronger than the Roman army. In short, I would need to have my dead leader come back to life before my eyes, and tell me that he wanted me to now carry his gospel to all the world, and that he who had now so obviously conquered death would be with me every step of the way.

For me the Easter story is not so much the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from death on a cross to new life as it is the resurrection of the disciples from heart-stopping fear to courageous, death defying faith. And while we may try to doubt the historical truth of Christ’s resurrection, there is no doubt at all that the disciples were dramatically changed by whatever happened that first Easter.

This is the evidence in scripture for the Resurrection and it goes beyond the disciples. Consider the case of Paul of Tarsus. He began one fateful day as Saul, the pious Pharisee on his way to Damascus as an agent of the Temple authorities to arrest any Christians he could find there and haul them back to their probable death in Jerusalem. By the end of that day he had been struck blind and was being ministered to by one of those very Christians he had sought to capture. So what happened to Saul? He claimed that the risen Christ had appeared to him in a vision, demanded to know why Paul was persecuting him, and told him to go to a particular house in Damascus to await further instructions. Paul became an apostle, established many churches and was eventually killed by the authorities just like the disciples were. Did it really happen that way? Did Paul really encounter the living Christ on that road to Damascus. I don't know. I wasn't there. But it is very clear to me that something must have happened to Paul to change him from a zealous Pharisee in the employ of powerful people in Jerusalem to a man who would now embrace a life and a Saviour that would mean that he would now be hunted to death by those same Temple authorities. What would it take for you to put your life on the line in that way? As for me, I think I would have to be confronted by the crucified Messiah himself and be told that in persecuting him I was also persecuting the God of my life-long faith.

So the Easter story is not so much about the resurrection of a single man who had been crucified three days before as it is a story about the resurrection of everyone who has been touched by him. Their lives were changed forever, and they went on to bring others into the new church that was appearing on the earth. The history of the early church tells many stories about how these new Christians fearless faced violent death as well. People who had never heard of Jesus of Nazareth before joining the early church, would go to their deaths singing hymns of praise to the crucified Messiah that they worshipped. I can't imagine how anyone could possibly have done this without an actual experience of this crucified Messiah now alive in their hearts. The church grew in spite of relentless persecution. For the first 300 years the blood of martyrs was the seed of the church.

And the story continues even into our own day. We still can find examples of people who are drawn by the living Christ to live out his message of God's Kingdom, putting their comfortable lives at risk, saying good-bye to their accomplishments and their status in the world. I think of Jean Vanier, son of the Governor General of Canada who went to work in a home for people with severe mental handicaps. He established the L'Arche communities that now exist across the world. Or Henri Nouwen, a brilliant theologian and professor at Harvard resigned his position to work in the L'Arche community in Richmond Hill, just a few miles north of here.

Why would anyone do this? When you ask them they claim that they are following a risen Messiah, the same Jesus of Nazareth that was crucified two thousand years ago and yet continues to live. And they tell us that this same Messiah is calling to each one of us to put aside our self-interest as much as we are able to do, to risk our very lives in the service of this same Kingdom of God that Jesus announced during his time on the earth. This is what is required of us by the living God, the One that raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead to life again. The good news is that this risen God will be with us no matter what happens to us in life, in death and in life beyond death, just as he was to the disciples, the early church and the saints of every day and age. It is both a fearful and a wonderful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Amen