Easter: From Believing to

Practicing Resurrection

Easter Sunday

*John 20:1-18 Rev. Todd B. Freeman*

*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa April 16, 2017*

**God has completely taken care of whatever it is that you or I, or church theologians from ages past, or the biblical authors themselves, believe has separated us from God and eternal life.** This is a promise of Easter, and this is the truth revealed through the power of the stories of Jesus’ death and resurrection. Yes, they do contain real power, for without an understanding of the cross and the empty tomb the faith tradition known as Christianity would have never developed. Nor would we have any knowledge of Jesus’ teachings, his life and ministry.

This morning we heard the resurrection account from the Gospel of John. But wait, you say. These resurrection stories, as recorded in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, have so many discrepancies and apparent contradictions with one another that there’s no way they can all be an accurate eyewitness description of what actually happened on Easter morning.

For instance, only Matthew says there was an earthquake that rolled away the stone from in front of the tomb. How did the others authors not including this extraordinary detail in their accounts? How many women came to the tomb Easter morning? The answer is one, two, three, or more than three, depending on which gospel you read. Who did the women see at the tomb? One angel or two? Upon seeing the empty tomb Matthew says the women were “filled with joy.” John tells us that Mary Magdalene, the only woman who came to the tomb, cried. Who actually went into the tomb and in what order? Again, that depends on which account you read. Did Jesus appear to anybody? If so, to who and where? That, too, depends.

These apparent contradictions and discrepancies in details, along with many others, have forced people throughout the ages to do the monumental Olympic-sized mental gymnastics necessary to reconcile and combine all four biblical stories into what they believe is simply one-in-the-same historically factual event. They’ve had to do the same with the very different Christmas birth narratives, as well. As an aside, many of those same folks declare that you can not be a Christian unless you, too, believe it all literally. My personal and professional response to those efforts: What a waste of time and energy.

Progressive biblical scholars have long recognized that each of the four gospel writers had their own important theological points to make, and the details they added or subtracted were intentionally part of the meaning they wanted to get across. Saying that, there *is* truth to be revealed in and through each of these and every other story in the Bible. But as we have learned here at College Hill, **something doesn’t have to be an eyewitness historical literal fact in order for it to contain truth**.

The Rev. Carl Gregg, who posted a blog in 2012 on the patheos.com website entitled *“Practice Resurrection”: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter*,puts it into perspective the way I am now convinced is the best way to approach Easter. “**I invite you to consider that we should worry *less*about what people say they believe happened one Sunday morning 2,000 years ago and *more*about [whether] we are living as if resurrection still happens.**”

In other words, and I mean this seriously, what difference does it really make that biblical stories appear contradictory or even completely implausible? **Does your faith rise and fall based on whether you *believe* biblical accounts are historically accurate in every respect and must be interpreted as absolute fact?** For many, many Christians the answer is an absolute yes. For many others, who feel forced to believe the same way, they have left organized religion altogether, or have found a more theologically and spiritually progressive congregation.

Let me share a story. Clarence Jordan was born in 1912 in Georgia. He came from a white Southern Baptist farming family and went on to earn a Ph.D. in New Testament Greek from a Southern Baptist seminary. Combining those two interests in 1942, Clarence, his wife, and another couple purchased 440 acres of land in Sumter County near Americus, Georgia. They called it Koinonia Farm (the Greek word for ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion’). It became Koinonia Partners, which eventually birthed Habitat for Humanity International under the leadership of Millard Fuller, who was deeply inspired by Clarence. Clarence died in 1969 not long after the first Koinonia Partners house was built, but the legacy and challenge of his life live on. Given his religious background and his life’s work, listen carefully to his thoughts on the topic of resurrection:

**The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the *full hearts of his transformed disciples*. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*. Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*.**

Clarence Jordan practiced resurrection. On this joyous Easter morning, I’d like for us to **explore the implications of moving beyond a belief or not in a physical bodily resurrection to works of practicing resurrection**. The Easter story of the resurrection is ultimately about God overcoming the powers of oppression and domination in this world, extending that to power over death itself. It’s about God transforming despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life. So like Jesus’ first disciples, **how are we, then, partnering with God today to usher in hope, compassion, love and new life?**

In that same 2012 blog, Carl Gregg shares the following. Irish writer, philosopher and story teller Peter Rollins speaks to what it might look like to practice — or fail to practice — resurrection. Rollins begins with the intentionally shocking assertion that, “Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think.” Yet, after a dramatic pause, he continues, “**I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed**, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However, there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.”

This is a profound reflection. So again I ask: **How are you and I, and we together as a congregation, practicing resurrection? Conversely, when and how do we deny the resurrection?**

Five years ago our adult church school class studied a Living the Questions curriculum entitled *Saving Jesus Redux*. The lesson on “Resurrection” included the following concerning what it means to practice resurrection.

The image of the resurrected Jesus going before us, leading us into the life that we were created for, has been an encouragement for generations of disciples. Whatever holds us in bondage, whether that bondage is of our own doing or because of life’s circumstances, Jesus goes before us, breaking the power of situations that have otherwise left us as good as dead.

Where the power of this conviction is seen most clearly is not in simply being convinced that something sensational happened 2000 years ago and all we have to do is “believe” in it for an eternal reward. The real power comes, when in very real and tangible ways, the followers of this Jesus become the body of Christ in the world, striving to bring new life to the world, to eradicate injustice, poverty, [racism] and violence.

In both the society at large and in people’s personal lives: the practice of resurrection is about otherwise “dead” people being inwardly transformed and empowered to transform society. To leave the resurrection as a “one-off” event that happened long ago guts it of its true power to inspire and work change in the world today.

Preaching Easter Sunday, William Sloane Coffin reminded his congregation at New York’s Riverside Church of their obligation to take the resurrection out of the realm of ancient [story] and bring it to life:

“It’s dark, the world’s at risk, there’s conflict, misunderstanding, poverty, racism, violence—but over here a group is working to do this, and over there a group working to do that, until it almost seemed like, despite the imperfections of the world, there might be a glimmer of hope—brought on by people just like us. By God’s grace, WE bring new life to the world.”

A fuller understanding of resurrection and of Easter, then, are finally not just about the ‘way back then’ or the ‘way off in the future,’ but today! Remember that **we are filled with the same Spirit, the same Sacred Presence that was in Jesus. That Spirit, then and now, can redeem life, can infuse hope, and can move you and I, as well as the people and circumstances around us, toward new life**.To paraphrase Clarence Jordan, the proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, vacant grave and a rolled away stone, but the full hearts of his transformed disciples, a spirit-filled fellowship, and a carried-away church.

**So after you ponder what it is *you* believe about resurrection, the next and more important question becomes, to what will be your *response*?**

Amen.

Resources:

Carl Gregg, “‘Practicing Resurrection’: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter, March 30, 2012, patheos.com

Saving Jesus Redux - Lesson 11: Resurrection, Living the Questions DVD and print curriculum.