

No One Has a Monopoly on Access to God

Easter Sunday

Matthew 28:1-10
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I want to begin this Easter sermon with a true story that I shared with you a few years ago that I think bears repeating. Though it's a personal story, I think it reflects an aspect of the journey of faith and belief that many of you here gathered here this morning may have experienced.

In the summer of 1997, 17 years ago, I was interviewed by the Pastor Nominating Committee of Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas. Bethany is a small congregation, and the only one in Grace Presbytery that had officially associated itself with the inclusive More Light Presbyterian movement, just as College Hill is the only congregation in Eastern Oklahoma Presbytery that has done so.

Needless to say, that congregation considered itself to be a progressive congregation, both theologically as well as socially. I considered myself to be progressive, as well. But during the interview process I was asked the following question. **"Would you have a problem with someone who serves as an elder on the Session who doesn't believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus?"** I still clearly remember my response to the person who asked that question. **"I personally have no reason not to believe in it. But no, I wouldn't have a problem with someone who doesn't believe it in the resurrection literally."** This exchange made me realize that while someone can be considered quite progressive in one setting, he or she could also be considered almost traditional in another. You may have experienced this yourself.

Upon further discussion with that Pastor Nominating Committee I learned that a former interim pastor at that church preached an Easter sermon some years earlier making the bold statement that **unless a person believed the resurrection stories literally – as in a physical bodily resurrection – they had no right to even call themselves a Christian.** There's probably a majority of Christians today who still believe that. And for that interim pastor **it was a requirement for consideration to identify oneself as a Christian.**

Even all those years ago, however, I held to the position that **believing anything literally in the Bible wasn't a prerequisite in and of itself to call oneself a Christian.** Rather, **being a Christian, in my opinion, is more about considering oneself a follower of the teachings and ways of Jesus. Calling oneself a Christian involves looking to Jesus as the definitive revelation, but not necessarily only one, to help us discern the nature and character of God.**

So my own understanding of what it means to be a Christian is obviously much broader and more inclusive than those who require certain beliefs like the literal physical resurrection of Jesus. But to be fair to that interim pastor who preached that Easter sermon, I truly believe that he was speaking as a person of faith, with a strong conviction that this was his best understanding of God's will. And as you know, that particular belief concerning resurrection was a position I used to hold dearly myself. **I no longer believe, however, that Christianity falls apart if one doesn't believe in a literal bodily resurrection. Therefore, it's further proof to me that a life of faith is not so much about absolute certainty as it is about embracing the mystery of the Divine, and understanding oneself as being on a remarkable journey where even our deepest held beliefs can be challenged and even changed.** It's also a reminder to those of us who call ourselves inclusive, that we must not, in turn, judge and condemn those with different theological, social, and political perspectives, even if we have been judged and condemned by them. That's one of those 'ways of Jesus.'

To borrow a phrase from the Apostle Paul, though we find ourselves on different ends of the theological spectrum, for the most part we are both simply trying to "speak the truth in love" to one another. But as Pontius Pilate is recorded in the Gospel of John to have asked Jesus, **"What is truth?"**

Most of us raised in the Western world over the past 200 years have been taught to equate "truth" with literal historical verifiable facts. But **what if there is a different kind of truth – a truth that is filled with mystery and ambiguity, and less absolute from a literal perspective; a truth revealed by metaphorical and symbolic language that points to a deeper truth?**

This is what lies at the very heart of progressive Christianity – having the right and the willingness to question long-held traditional understandings of church doctrines and biblical interpretations, while respecting intellectual integrity through the use of the latest in biblical, scientific, and social knowledge and understanding. (Yes, I realize that I'm channeling the late Rev. Dr. Harold Hill at this moment. He taught me a lot.)

If we continue to allow the church to be unyielding and dogmatic, which it has been through most of its history, what is the inevitable outcome? In effect, if the church survives or continues to be relevant in any way to a growing number of Americans, what the above example reflects is the imposition of an **'institutional monopoly on access to God.'** That favorite phrase of mine was used by Jesus Seminar author Marcus Borg to explain how **organized religion throughout the ages imposes certain requirements in order for people (in their opinion) to have full access to the love, grace, mercy and redemption of God.** So important is this concept to me that I see this now as a primary guiding force in my own ministry – to do what I can to help dismantle this notion that the church has a right to an institutional monopoly on access to God. **The church must put an end to its endless litmus tests that it has used, and continues to use, to determine whether someone is a 'legitimate' person of faith.**

As I mentioned earlier, there was a time not too long ago when I didn't have a reason to question the literal interpretation of this Easter story of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Once the seed was planted, however, that **there are other legitimate ways to look at and interpret these resurrection narratives**, including that perhaps the biblical authors themselves *knew* they were writing metaphorically, not literally, I allowed myself to explore, question, and eventually change my mind from my previous literal understanding. Notice that I use the phrase, "change my mind," because that's what it

was: the conscious personal choice to reflect upon the experience of my own journey of faith and reevaluate my previously held convictions.

That is the message that I bring to you this Easter morning – not to tell you what to believe, or try to force the changing of your mind in relation to your own theological understandings and biblical interpretations – but rather to simply warn that the church's list of fundamental belief requirements that imposes an institutional monopoly on access to God is what I believe Jesus' own life and ministry tried to dismantle.

Jesus challenged the Jewish Temple system that required prescribed sacrifices that they believed were necessary in order for God to forgive. This, among Jesus' other challenges to the powers that be, led to his execution. Yet within the first century after his death the newly formed Christian movement started prescribing it's own requirements on access to God, requirements that were engraved in granite upon Roman Emperor Constantine's conclave that resulted in the *Nicene Creed* in early part of the fourth century. Throughout the following centuries the Roman Catholic Church continued to build on this list of requirements – dropping some while adding others.

The Protestant Reformation that began in the early 1500s sought, in part, to put an end to that monopoly. They did this by emphasizing God's grace – **God's unmerited grace that didn't require the mediation of the clergy to allow people access to the presence of God. Yet, soon after Luther and Calvin, that became the new requirement** – that in order to have full access to the love, grace, and redemption of God, a person had to believe in this newly-prescribed understanding of God's grace. And so the cycle continued.

To this day, I would suspect that a majority of Christians think that the only legitimate way to interpret the Easter event is in a literal, physical, bodily resurrection. But think. If taken to its logical and literal conclusion means that Jesus is still out there somewhere physically, not just spiritually. And saying that Jesus is physically sitting at the right hand of God makes no sense either, as if God is located at some specific spot somewhere "up there." That, to many 21st century folks, just isn't a realistic belief. **And if forced to believe it in order to be part of a congregation, they have chosen to leave the church altogether.**

There is still an enormous amount of fear that anything but the traditional literal interpretation may result in the ultimate punishment – eternal banishment in Hell. More and more Christians, however, are questioning that ancient concept as well, now including some of those who identify themselves as being on the evangelical end of the theological spectrum.

Just think of the ramifications on the institutional monopoly on access to God if Christianity were to remove the threat of eternal damnation. That continues to be a club used to beat people into submission, and it is something for which most of organized religion is not yet willing to let go.

So what if God really is a God of love and unmerited grace – a grace that is extended to all people throughout all time and with all beliefs – and not just to those who prescribe to list of requirements and specific beliefs in order to be recipients of that grace? The irony, of course, is that isn't really grace at all if you have to believe certain things before you can receive that grace.

None of this means, however, that there aren't certain paths and understandings that lead to living life more fully, to loving more abundantly, and being who God has created us to be. But it does serve to help dismantle the institutional monopoly on access to God.

If you agree (and you are not required to do so) then I'll leave you with this question: What can you do personally, and what can we do together as a congregation, to help in this process of dismantling the institutional monopoly on access to God?

Perhaps that's the meaning of Easter itself, that no one has a monopoly on access to God, including us.

Amen.