

Pay attention!
Be astonished!
Tell about it!

Easter Sunday: Hope, New Life, Transformation

Mark 16:1-8
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Just yesterday I received an email sent by a Presbyterian pastor friend and colleague, entitled, "Alleluia! The Lord is risen! I can think of no better way to express the meaning of Easter. So, I'd like to share this message with you this day.

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!

This proclamation of Good News was first shouted by people living in a world of oppression, nationalism, fear, injustice, bigotry, religious arrogance, hatred, economic disparity, sexism, violence, social privilege. It was a world which would not accept the presence of a loving, grace-filled, forgiving, healing, transforming, Incarnational God in its midst. Yet, the early followers of the Risen Lord were eager to boldly shout, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!!"

Today we live in the same world with all the same infectious diseases. Let us boldly shout with our lives and voices, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!!" Let us be Easter People in the midst of a Good Friday world.

Thanks be to God for your faithful shoutings and whisperings, "Alleluia!!! The Lord is risen!!!!" which have brought light into the darkness of the world and human suffering.

He is risen, indeed!!! Alleluia!!!

There is a story that I like to retell every 3-4 years on Easter Sunday. When I interviewed for the position of installed pastor at a small, progressive and inclusive Presbyterian congregation in Dallas back in 1997, 21 years ago now, I was asked by a person on the Pastor Nominating Committee if I would have a problem with someone who serves as an elder on the Session who doesn't believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus. My response back then was probably similar to one experienced by many of you at some point in your own journey of faith.

I responded to that question by stating that I had no reason *not* to believe the story of the Resurrection as anything but as literal history, that Jesus was in fact bodily

and physically raised from the dead. The reason I believed that had to do with two things. One, I thought I *had* to believe the story literally. And two, I had never been introduced to an alternative metaphorical understanding, while still realizing the disciples did indeed experience the very real spiritual presence of Jesus still with them after he died. But knowing how my own theological perspectives and biblical interpretations had changed over the years, especially compared to before I attended seminary, I stated to the person who asked me that question that if a church leader did not believe the story of the Resurrection literally, then I could live with that and I wouldn't have a problem with that person.

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 narrative literally – believed in a physical bodily resurrection – they had no right to call themselves a Christian. This particular belief, for that pastor, was a fundamental requirement and was non-negotiable.

Part of the message that I bring to you this Easter, therefore, is simply to warn that **the traditional church's list of what they consider fundamental belief requirements that impose an institutional monopoly on access to God and eternal life is what Jesus' own life and ministry tried to dismantle. And remember, Jesus said the mark of his followers is revealed in how they love one another, not what they profess to believe about Jesus.**

Recalling that story from back in Dallas is important to me. (By the way, I was called to be their pastor and served there for nine years.) The story reminds me how **the specifics of what you and I believe often change over time.** And perhaps even more importantly, it reminds and challenges us to **accept where other people are in their own personal faith beliefs.**

So, on this Easter Sunday we're not going to get into a conversation, let alone a debate, on what you "should" or "should not" believe about the literalness of the Resurrection. Your beliefs are your beliefs, and chances are you have very good reasons for believing the way you do. My main concern, therefore, isn't whether this story is taken literally or metaphorically. Rather, it's how it is interpreted and applied to our own lives and our church life.

The story of the Resurrection is often interpreted too narrowly, and even somewhat selfishly. Many a sermon will be preached today with its main point being that God's raising of Jesus from the dead means that if you believe this you get to spend eternity in heaven. According to the biblical narratives in the four gospels themselves, which don't agree about the specifics of the event, **is going to heaven really the primary gift of Easter?**

See if you can guess the author of the following quote. Here's a hint. It's from a book published in 1960 and adapted into a movie in 1962.

Sometimes the Bible in the hand of one man is worse than a whisky bottle in the hand of (another)... There are just some kind of men who – who're so busy worrying about the next world they've never learned to live in this one, and you can look down the street and see the results.

Those powerful words were spoken by the character Atticus Finch, written by Harper Lee in her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. These words, in a nutshell, describe a major flaw in the teaching within most of Christian organized religion today. **The story**

of the Resurrection, with its theme of an empty tomb and “Christ Is Risen,” is not primarily about the promise of eternal life, yet that is part of it. Above all, it’s about hope, new life, and transformation. And that applies in the **here and now** in how you and I choose to live our lives and be in relationship with God and other people. To put it another way, **Easter is more about the here than the hereafter! The application of the Resurrection story, therefore, is more about our doing than our believing. It’s more about our journey than our final destination.** As I have also shared in the past, the ‘Living the Questions’ church school curriculum, *Saving Jesus Redux*, talks about **“Practicing Resurrection.”** It states:

The real power of the Resurrection comes when the followers of Jesus become the body of Christ in the world, striving to bring new life to the world, to eradicate injustice, poverty, 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.**

Notice there are indeed both personal and societal dimensions to “practicing resurrection” in the here and now. The Easter promise of hope, new life, and transformation is this: **the ways of God ultimately prevail over the attitudes, behaviors, and systems opposed to God’s ways.**

A crucial part of the Easter promise, as revealed in and through the life and ministry of Jesus, and through this story of his resurrection, is that the Sacred Presence of God is always with us and within us – miraculously enabling us to initiate and participate in profound moments of love, compassion, peace, joy, justice, dignity, and therefore become an actual real life expression of hope, new life, and transformation. This is what marks us as ‘Easter people’ and as a ‘resurrection community.’

The forty days of Lent have now given way to fifty days known as Eastertide, the season of Easter. Throughout Lent we followed the devotions in the small booklet, ***Mary Oliver and the Poetry of Lent***. The booklet ends with a brief excerpt of one of her poems chosen for Easter Sunday, entitled, “Morning Poem.” See if you can make a connection with the meaning of Easter.

Every morning the world is created.
Under the orange sticks of the sun
the heaped ashes of the night
turn into leaves again.

Do not these simple words indeed reflect hope, new life, and transformation? This is emphasized on the cover of today’s worship bulletin, taken from the devotional booklet. Let’s read it together.

**Instructions for
Living a Life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.**

Since we have incorporated quite a selection of poetry into our services of worship throughout Lent, I’d like to close with a poem by Rev. Bret Myers, posted just this

past week on progressivechristianity.org. It's entitled, "**Easter Encouragement for the Journey**".

Remember that resurrection is more than mere resuscitation! It is life transformed!

It is faith in possibilities, when others are convinced of inevitability.

It is the courage to love others, when they don't love you in return...

to show compassion, when others are heaping judgment...

to live by peace, when others are being violent...

to work for justice, when others are working for wealth...

to respond with gentleness, when others are reacting with rage...

and to trust that life, well-lived, even if short-lived,
is preferable to longevity without virtue.

Don't remain caterpillars when you can become butterflies!

Live beautifully! Birth goodness in all you think, say, and do!

For you are called to life abundant!

God's blessings be with you.

Amen.