

Not Your Typical Easter Message

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Near the very top of your worship bulletin, today and every Sunday, you'll find a tag line that briefly describes the overall identity of College Hill. Preceding "**Traditional Worship**" and "**Inclusive Congregation**" you'll see the proud declaration, "**Progressive Theology**". What's that mean? That should act as a clue that if you're looking for a typical, traditional sermon on the orthodox understanding of Easter and the Resurrection, this really isn't the right sanctuary. Or, maybe it is.

A starting place for progressives always involves a consideration of what type of narrative language was used by biblical authors in telling their stories. **Are their stories the simple eyewitness reports of actual, literal, historical events? Or, are they reflections that use metaphorical language to point to and reveal particular truths they are trying to get across to their readers? Or, perhaps some combination of both?**

For many Christians, certainly myself for a good portion of my life, believing in a literal bodily resurrection of Jesus is an absolute necessity in order to consider oneself a Christian. It's like if the technology were available these stories could have been proven through photographs or video. But for a smaller yet growing number of Christians today, these resurrection stories of an empty tomb were never meant to be interpreted as eyewitness accounts in the first place.

In true progressive fashion, recently deceased Jesus Seminar scholar, **Marcus Borg**, asks, "Does the truth of Easter depend upon the empty tomb and appearance stories being historically factual in this objective sense?" He answers by making a bold claim, a claim in which many of us can now personally affirm, though only after years of struggle to understand, and with no small amount of internal conflict. Borg states, "**I see the empty tomb and whatever happened to the corpse of Jesus to be ultimately irrelevant to the truth of Easter.**" While some certainly consider that to be a purely heretical statement, Borg goes on to explain how he himself has moved from a childhood belief that Easter meant that Jesus literally rose from the tomb, as in the resuscitation of a corpse. His argument, it needs to be noted, is not that we know the tomb was not empty or that nothing happened to Jesus' body, but simply that it doesn't matter. **It simply doesn't matter.**

Another Jesus Seminar fellow, the now retired Episcopal Bishop **John Shelby Spong**, summarized it this way in his 1994 book, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*:

The subject of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the foundation of Christianity itself. It was the experience that came to be called Easter that propelled the Christian movement into history.

I still assert with deep conviction that my understanding of Christianity is rooted firmly in the reality of Easter. My faith in Jesus' resurrection, however,

does not today demand that I claim a literalness for the words I use to talk about that resurrection. I do maintain, however, that the effects of that experience called Easter are demonstrably objective and real.

While I consider this particular debate to be of deep importance and significance, I also realize that the real issue for most of us isn't so much about the exact nature of these Easter stories themselves and the kind of language that was used to tell them. Rather, the important issue is **what**

do these stories mean? What is the truth to which these stories point? What relevance does it have in the life of the Christian church, and in our own lives?

Before we look at that let me put it in perspective this way. The word 'orthodox' literally means, 'right thinking'. Orthodoxy, therefore, becomes a set of established church doctrines, beliefs, practices, and biblical interpretations to which people of faith are expected to adhere and conform. While fundamentalists take this to the extreme, it still exists even within the most traditional and theologically conservative mainline churches – and yes, that includes Presbyterians. To progressives, however, this is simply an attempt to put God in a box, and ultimately becomes an issue of authority and control. **Yet God can never be understood as 'orthodox' – for neither God nor Jesus nor the Holy Spirit can be limited to one "right" understanding. Nor, do we believe, that God demands only one path to our knowledge and experience of God's Sacred Presence in our world, and in ourselves.** Perhaps the apostle Paul stated it best when he said that now we only see in a mirror dimly. And that certainly applies when it comes to the resurrection.

Let us give ourselves permission to realize that the stories of the resurrection can never be fully understood by the rational mind, or described by clear-cut dogmas to which we must give our intellectual assent. Let us simply take refuge in the stories themselves, like as we heard it on this day, for instance, from the Gospel of Luke.

Let us also acknowledge that without the story of Jesus' Resurrection, Christianity most likely would not exist. Nor would we be here in this remarkable community of faith and friendship. Therefore, even though the stories of the Resurrection are themselves shrouded in mystery, the Easter message can still have relevance. It can be a source of transformation in our own lives and in society today.

One particular portion of the Easter message, which perhaps isn't repeated often enough, is a powerful one of great hope. Concerning the hereafter I summarize it this way: **Death does not have the final word. There is life beyond this life. Though no one knows what that may be like, we believe it is lived eternally in the loving and Sacred Presence of God.** And even though believing in this hope is not the determining factor of whether or not one is a Christian, **it is a message that gives Easter its power.**

You may be surprised to learn, however, that many of the first Christians already believed in resurrection and life after death. In early Christianity, then, perhaps the most important understanding of the stories of the resurrection had to do with rebirth and new creation in the here and now – that God's new world had been born. You've heard it before, you'll hear it again and again: **the stories of the resurrection point to an experiential reality that transformation and new life are possible** – for you and I as individuals, and for us together as a community. That new life can be hopeful and rich and fulfilling. For resurrection points to a love – God's love for us, and our love for one another – that triumphs in the end. **It points to an ultimate triumph over all the powers of tyranny, oppression, domination, injustice, and death. It promises that the ways of God**

will prevail over all the attitudes, behaviors, and systems opposed to God's ways. Yes, transformation is needed – but not just for some, but for each of us and for the entire world itself.

The truth of Easter is grounded in the experiences of Christ's living Presence with us and within us, not in what happened (or didn't happen) on a particular Sunday almost two thousand years ago." Let us not get stuck, therefore, in orthodoxy, thinking there is only one right way to believe and practice and experience our faith. Instead, let us claim and hold to the promise and hope of resurrection, a hope of new life and transformation. As Spong concludes:

I peer beyond the limits in which my life is lived, and I say my prayerful yes...

Yes to Jesus - my primary window into God;

Yes to resurrection - which asserts that the essence of Jesus is the essence of a living God;

Yes to life after death - because one who has entered a relationship with God has entered the timelessness of God.

Easter is both God's YES to us and to the world God created, and our YES to God.

Happy Easter and Amen.