

Easter Meditation
I Corinthians 15, selected verses
Mark 16:1-8
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We are blessed today: the sun is out, and the weather is warm, even here, near the lake. It could be worse: in the years that I served at Fourth Church downtown, I was in charge of the Easter Sunrise Service at Oak Street Beach, usually a delightful obligation – until the time a spring snow storm kicked up from the lake and blanketed us in white. Christ is risen, indeed. It felt more like “it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.” So I’m grateful for the weather today, and glad to see so many of you choosing to spend this morning, here in church. Though it’s customary in many pulpits to scold the crowds – why aren’t you here on other Sundays – this preacher is delighted to see you, and welcome you to worship today. You are joining millions of brothers and sisters in Christ around the world in celebrating the good news of the resurrection.

So I’ll share a little secret with you: many Christians around the world – maybe most of us here – come with questions in our hearts today. Questions that we may be embarrassed to admit we have. Questions like “how could it be really true, Christ’s resurrection from the dead?” Questions like “what if this life on earth, in the end, is all there is?” Questions like “with everything that’s going wrong, is there even really a God?” Maybe it’s blasphemy to name these things, on such a day as this, but I want you to know that your pastor knows: beneath the surface, in the crowds that gather from here to St. Peter’s, there are questions and doubts that poke stubbornly through the surface like the crocuses and daffodils that brave a Chicago spring.

I used to think we moderns were the only ones who doubted. I used to think that if we had only been there, at the empty tomb, we would believe and trust without a doubt that Christ was raised from the dead. But as we listen to the Scripture today, I'm struck that some Christians have *always* harbored doubts about the resurrection. In this morning's first Scripture lesson, Jesus' disciples experience the empty tomb not with joy but with alarm and fear. According to the gospel of Mark, the women who witness the empty tomb don't celebrate – they run from the grave, uncertain and scared, without telling a soul what they've seen. And just twenty years later – just *twenty years* after the fact -- St. Paul has to remind the early Christians that hundreds of eyewitnesses had seen the risen Lord among them ... and then he must explain again why it matters, and how on earth it can be true. His letter could have been written for us today.

There have *always* been questions and doubts. Less than three centuries after Christ, St. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, began to collect supposed relics from Jerusalem the way some people collect Hummel figurines: nails from the cross, the crown of thorns, even the cross itself (Peter Manseau, "Faith, Proof and Relics," *WSJ* April 11, 2007, p. W1). In the centuries that followed, relics grew wildly popular, satisfying the stubborn questions and persistent longing for proof that the resurrection was real. In fact they were so popular that they began to be mass-produced, multiplying like self-help books at Borders. By the Reformation John Calvin quipped that there were so many pieces of the purported "True Cross" that you could construct an entire ship out of them.

The problem is ... the problem is that if it's proof we're looking for, we'll never get it, even with material things like relics. This weekend's *Wall Street Journal* features a superb article on the Shroud

of Turin – the purported burial cloth from Jesus’ tomb. This tattered linen 14 feet long by 4 feet wide, “yellowed by time, scarred by fire, stained like a tablecloth not worth keeping” bears an image of a bearded man, naked and prepared for burial. But, as author Peter Manseau notes, carbon dating places the Shroud, with 95% certainty, not from the time of Jesus but from around 1300 AD. But he also wisely concludes that scientific study misses the point of faith anyway: “Belief,” he says, “any belief, whether in God, the Resurrection, even the Force – requires a partial abandonment of the rational. This does not mean that faith is irrational, only ... that [some things are] explained only through acknowledgement that proof is not always the highest good.” I agree. Proof is what we want when it comes to medicine; proof is what we want when it comes to nuclear physics; proof is what we want when it comes to aeronautical engineering. But faith, by its very nature, is not proof-driven. As Manseau asserts, “despite scientific investigations, [beliefs] are not something required by the rules of logic.” Nor are many of the most valuable and cherished experiences of human life: “There is no rational need to write a poem or to paint a picture” – no rational need for Handel to compose the Halleluia Chorus, no rational need for Tiffany to construct this Resurrection window – “and there is no rational need to believe, which is to search for something meaningful in the enigmatic markings that define our lives.”

There is no rational need to search for meaning ... there is no rational need to yearn for love ... there is no rational need to want to trust AND SERVE AND GIVE. And we’re all here this morning because of our irrational longing to believe that life is full of promise, full of hope, full of grace, in spite of whatever evidence to the contrary we may see in front of us.

Why do we keep believing? This is how St. Paul explained it two thousand years ago, to his doubting friends: we keep believing first of all because even though we haven't witnessed for ourselves, we trust the word of those who saw it and believed. Eye-witnesses like Peter and James, Mary and Paul himself, and five hundred others, who saw how Christ died for our sins according to scripture, that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead, and they saw him with their own eyes. And they told it to the next generation, and to the next ... until someone told it to you and me, and that is why we're here. For me, it was my Grandma, and my Mom and Dad, and my Sunday School teachers, bless their patient hearts, and more recently, parishioners among you here, who testify to Christ's living presence in your lives. That's why we keep believing.

And we keep believing, Paul tells us, because it would be pitiful for us to think that this is all there is. Yes, suffering is still alive and well ... yes, injustice happens all too frequently ... yes, earthquakes rack Italy and gunfire fells the young on the streets of Chicago, and far too many people have lost their livelihoods in this dreadful economy. But for us to imagine that this is the last word – that we can only hope for more catastrophes, more violence, more despair – *that* would be utterly tragic. Of course there will still be suffering, and we would be naïve to pretend otherwise. But just as Adam's sin got this whole tangled mess started, Christ's sinlessness began the process of righting the world. Christ's rising is not the end of the story – it's the start. As St. Paul puts it, "all shall be made alive in Christ: first those who belong to Christ; then finally the rest, after he has destroyed every evil. ... And the last to be destroyed is death." We keep believing not because everything is perfect now, but because it isn't – but what we see is not the last word ... and the love and life of Jesus Christ will triumph in the end.

And finally, we keep believing because we *do* see evidence ... evidence of new life all the time. I love the analogies St. Paul uses, because they're so simple, even children understand them. You know animals and birds and fish that live all around us? There are bodies made for earth, that breathe with lungs ... there are bodies made for air, that fly with wings ... there are bodies made for sea, that swim with fins. Each body is perfect for where it lives: so with the resurrection body. Our earthly body wouldn't do for heaven. Or, Paul asks, You know the seeds you plant, each spring? Tomato seeds or marigolds? The seeds you plant, they start out dry, and small, puny and fragile, and nothing like you'd want to eat. But after you plant them, they grow into something new altogether. Their fruit or flower looks nothing like the seed they once were. It's just the same with the resurrected body: when we die, the seed disappears, but what appears in its place, in heaven, will be glorious, beautiful, eternal.

And here, and now, new life comes in its own way. I don't know about you, but sometimes I long for days that have gone by: days when the stock market soared ... days when unemployment didn't worry us. Perhaps you long for days when your loved one wasn't sick or you didn't get the diagnosis that has struck fear in your heart. Perhaps you long for former days of love and laughter and innocence. Perhaps those days are gone. But the promise is this: something new is growing out of what once was ... and it will be different, it will never be the same. But our Lord is the Lord of life, and new growth will flower, and new fruit will be born that one day we will recognize from the seed that once was buried and died.

Beloved in Christ, if you come with questions, well, join the crowd. Did Christ really rise from the dead? Is there more to life than

what we see on earth? Or even more, as my friend, Doug King, once put it:

“Does God really reign? This is the question that must be answered on Easter. ... Perhaps no one can carry this belief with one hundred percent certainty all of the time. The world is just too broken [no to keep] inviting the question. But hopefully on the days when I cannot find a way to trust that God does indeed reign you can carry it for me and on other days I can return the favor” (Doug King, Associate Pastor, Brick Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, in an unpublished paper presented to the Moveable Feast preaching consortium, January, 2009).

We question, and we keep believing. But in the end, we're not in it alone. We have two thousand years of company, urging us on, carrying our faith for us when we can't carry it ... and sometimes, we return the favor, carrying for others what we now have received. Thanks be to God. Amen.