

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, *Rector*
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Easter Day, Year B
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Christ has died. Christ is risen, Christ will come again. That simple proclamation is among the oldest Easter messages we know of. They are the first words of hope and good news about the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Today, I want us to examine three questions. First, what happened on that Easter day? Second, what are some objections to a belief in the resurrection? Third, what difference does it make?

At 10:15 a.m. this morning, there will be an Easter Egg hunt. It's the most the memorable event of the day for many, kids and adults alike. Last year, I watched as the children sought out eggs as diligently as any modern pilgrim after truth. They were all lined up along the edge of the garden outside. They carried little baskets and were dressed in their best outfits. It's a great photo op but the children didn't care about that. Theirs was an excited anticipation for what is about to happen. Then they were unleashed to seek their prize.

The big kids look in trees and behind bushes and rocks. The smaller children go for the eggs right in front of them lying openly on the ground. They pick up one by one. It's all great fun but if you pay attention something funny starts to happen. It reminds me of the old saying, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket." After they have a few eggs in there, they bend over to pick up a new one. Some of the other eggs already in the basket fall out. They bend over, drop some eggs, pick up a new prize, and leave a trail. They often rediscover what they had just lost.

We sometimes do a similar thing in our spiritual lives. We start out believing the story of the first Easter. As we grow older and experience more we add things to the basket. It becomes layered with meaning at the outset - sometimes contradictory or confusing - a resurrected Lord and a bunny - sin and salvation. In time, Church can feel like a place of judgment rather than a community of hope. We experience different Christian traditions and religions. We read and reflect and talk. We come up against something, a literal or figurative death, and question the whole thing. Pretty soon we've added a bunch of stuff and dropped out quite a few things along the way without noticing. We forget the sheer hope and joy of that first encounter.

What is the Easter story? There is no biblical account describing the resurrection. Nobody saw it. What we have are two things. First, there are several stories in the gospels of people encountering an empty tomb where Jesus was buried. Second, there are numerous reports of men and women meeting the resurrected Christ.

Our reading from I Corinthians is the oldest biblical account of what happened. It was recorded by St. Paul several decades before any of the four gospels were written down. The message he conveys is simply that Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. He then recounts all of those to whom the resurrected Jesus appeared. To Peter, the disciples, 500 men and women, James, the other apostles, and then to Paul. He is seeking to show all the eyewitness accounts. There is an empty tomb and those who met the risen Christ.

But, of course, there are a variety of reasons not to believe Jesus was raised from the dead. Maybe someone stole the body. It's only 15 minutes to city. The tomb where he was buried was not like a plot we use. It was a cave dug out of rock with a boulder blocking the opening. Soldiers guarded the tomb. Romans marked it with an official seal. The stone was so large it would take twenty men to roll it away. It was not something you could do without someone catching you. Remember, the disciples were all in hiding because they thought their teacher was dead. We also see in the gospels they weren't too smart - at least not to devise a plan like that.

Some claim that Jesus was not dead but in a coma-like state. After Jesus was betrayed, beaten, abandoned, and crucified he was stabbed with a spear to make sure he was dead. Romans knew how to kill people - they were good at it. The body further would have been wrapped in heavy binding cloth and spices - like a mummy. After all that, no one in a coma is going to make it out.

Maybe the disciples imagined all the resurrection appearances or made up the whole thing. We sometimes feel the presence of loved ones soon after they have died. But that was a lot of mass hallucination multiple times by many people. Paul cites many witnesses. Remember, they thought he was dead and gone - they had backed the wrong man. Not many are going to risk everything, including death or imprisonment, for a mass hallucination or fabrication.

Finally, we know from modern science that dead people do not come back from the dead. Well, they knew that too. The story was just as miraculous and improbable then as now. They *did* expect that God would bring a resurrection of everyone at the end of time but not to *one* person. Dead people stayed dead. But they proclaimed, not even death could hold the Christ. If God could give life to the universe, could God not give new life to one person? Is it possible?

The best reason to believe Jesus *was* dead and raised is the rapid expanse of his followers, what became the Church - those who met the resurrected Christ. They moved from a group of scared men and women to proclaiming boldly that Jesus was Lord and had been raised to new life. Because Jesus was dead and had been raised we are restored to God. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. That is the first Easter message.

What difference does the resurrection make to us today? One might think that the empty tomb would have become the main image of the resurrection. But it didn't. The empty tomb is not the point.

The Easter proclamation is God's **YES** to the message and person of Jesus (*Barth*). Easter is an affirmation that because Jesus has been raised - we too shall be raised.

Instead of the empty tomb, the main image of our resurrection faith is the cross. It is a symbol of God and humanity joined together. The cross is the intersection of this world and the next, of heaven and earth, time and eternity come together - of life triumphing over death.

You know, I know, God knows, there is much broken in the world and in our lives. The cross is a symbol of that. Easter is the proclamation and promise that death, in all its forms, is not the end. God is making all things new. The metaphorical basket you have been carrying around - your experience, your heartbreak, your joy, your life - God takes all the pieces and makes them whole again. Nothing is left out and no one is forgotten.