

Do You Believe It?

We sing the glorious hymn "Jesus Christ is Risen Today!" this day of Easter. But the question I have for you is this: Is it true that Jesus, the crucified one from Galilee, was actually raised from the dead? Not that his soul went off to heaven. But that the broken body that was taken down from the cross, that human body, was raised up, made new, somehow, the same, yet, somehow, different? Is it true? Will you stake your life on it?

One of our very own bishops, Bishop Spong, was quoted as asking how anyone could expect his daughter, who was getting her PhD in physics, to believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Marcus Borg, a very popular theologian, a professor at Oregon State, a recent guest speaker at St. Clement's, our sister church, has asked why we feel our faith requires a belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

I think it's safe to say that no one wanted Jesus to rise from the dead. Left in the tomb, we could get back to the business at hand: back to making money, making love, making war. A world where Jesus stayed in the tomb is a world we can control. A world we know our way around. A world of dog eats dog, sure, but at least we know how to bite!

But, a risen Jesus?! A risen Jesus puts a cork in that life. A risen Jesus.....???

Hear this story told by Bishop Willimon:

"I am still haunted by a long conversation I had with a man who was a member of one of my early congregations. He told me that one evening, returning from a night of poker with pals, he had a stunning vision of the presence of the risen Christ. Christ appeared to him, undeniably, vividly. Yet, though the event shook him and stirred him deeply; in ten years he never told anyone about it, until he told me, his pastor. I pressed him on his silence. Was he embarrassed? Was he fearful others would mock him? Or fail to believe that this had happened to him? No, he explained. The reason why I told no one was I was too afraid it was true. And if it's true that Jesus is really real, that he had come personally to me, what then? I'd have to change my whole life! I'd have to become some sort of radical or something!" [Willimon, *Undone By Easter*, 40].

Can anyone relate!?

The famous playwright Oscar Wilde wrote a play about King Herod. He gave the play the name *Salome*, after Herod's stepdaughter. The one who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a plate.

Herod, it seems, heard that Jesus had been raising people from the dead. "I do not

wish him to do that," says Herod. "I forbid him to do that, I allow no man to raise the dead!" This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead!"

This, of course, is exactly what the powers that be tell us today about the resurrection of Jesus. Much of our science, our philosophy, our politics, says, in a loud voice, "everyone knows the dead don't rise!"

We say it too, so that, like the man Bishop Willimon knew, we can keep our lives just as they are. It only makes sense.

We are children of the Enlightenment. We know that the only reality is the reality we can see, touch, taste, smell or hear. Beyond that, there is nothing! All of which of course, supports the status quo. The powerful, the rich, even the intellectuals who have carved out comfortable spots for themselves in the world, join with Herod in saying "I forbid the dead to rise!"

For if Jesus rose from the dead, then this world, this life, this reality, is not all there is. And resurrection becomes something subversive to what we know. Resurrection becomes revolutionary to the existing state of affairs! So, to keep it away, to undermine its threat to what currently is, we deny it, we avoid it, we ridicule it. "The disciples stole the body", some say. "They saw a ghost," say others. "They simply made it up out of their grief and fear." Or, some will concede: "Jesus was raised like we all are when we die, his soul went to heaven."

I'm sure among you here today, one or more of these rings true. Yet, in first century Israel, there were many claimed messiahs. None survived the death of the would-be messiah. Except one. The one we are here to celebrate today.

So, what happened? We can know only a little. Jesus' death was horrifically public. He hung on the cross for all to see, in the daylight, to his death.

The resurrection, the moment it occurred, was in the tomb, in the dark. A pile of linens left behind. A private affair between Jesus and God. A private affair, to a point.

They knew it was him, Mary, and Peter and the others. They knew it was him; but it wasn't just the old him. He was different as well as being the same. He was transformed in a way they could not exactly describe. Bishop Wright says the raised Jesus was "Transphysical". Transphysical. Meaning, more physical than before. More real. More alive.

Bishop Wright, in trying to help us get our head around this transphysical risen Jesus suggests that as one might compare a ghost to a human being, the human being is more substantial, more real, more alive than the ghost, just so are we to the

risen Jesus, who is that much more real, alive, substantial, than us.

Confused?

So were the apostles, and they saw this risen Jesus face to face. He cooked their breakfast, yet suddenly appeared in locked rooms. He invited Thomas to touch his wounds, yet walked for miles to Emmaus with a pair of followers who didn't recognize him.

Hard to grasp, isn't it?

No wonder we have retreated these last many years to a belief that resurrection simply means the soul going to heaven forever. Somehow, Plato's idea is easier to get than the reality promised to us by God through Jesus.

Yet, this risen, transphysical Jesus, is the one to focus on. For what happened to him is precisely what God promises will happen to us. It is the central teaching of the Bible.

From the book of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament, to the book of Revelation, the last book of the New Testament, the resounding theme is not only that creation is good; it is that creation will be remade, redeemed, renewed.

Unlike our Hindu brothers and sisters, whose reality consists of circles upon circles, as Christians, we believe that reality has a beginning and an end. In the end, a new creation will be made, a new story will be told.

I am not suggesting there is no heaven. But the faith of our fathers and mothers in the early church, the writings of Paul and others, tell us heaven is not the final destination. It is a way point. A place in the nearer presence of God, but not the final destination. What awaits us all is the resurrection of all. The same resurrection of which Jesus is the first-born. A new body, a new creation, new challenges, and a new life.

It is not, as so much popular fiction suggests, that God's children will be raptured into heaven. (The rapture is not found in Scripture, it is the invention of an imaginative 19th century American preacher). Instead, as the scriptures teach, heaven will come to earth, and the two, as bride and groom, will become one.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Heaven on earth. Heaven, God's kingdom, in a new, transformed creation. This is the faith of the church.

St. Paul says we "shall be fellow workers with God" in this new creation. He insists

that the present life has value precisely because God will raise our bodies into something new in the new creation that is the resurrection. And because of that, and I quote Bishop Wright:

“What you do in the present, by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbor as yourself, will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether. They are part of what we may call building God’s kingdom.” [NT Wright, *Surprised by Hope*].

Where do we set our sights?

If we follow the Herod’s of this world, and they are legion, we shall worship the worst of this world, its economy, its national security, its neurosis for safety as the only reality there is. In Herod’s world, there can be only grasping, only protecting number one. In the world of the resurrected Jesus, kindness, trust, risk, compassion; giving it all away; knowing these seeds will bear unimaginable fruit in the new creation.....that is the life, here and now, that we Christians are made for.

Confused? Troubled? Afraid?

If you are, be glad. Just so were the apostles. But then, everything changed. And those who trembled behind locked doors in an upper room became resolute witnesses to the new reality seen through the open door of the Lord’s resurrection.

Herod said: “I allow no man to raise the dead! This man must be found and told that I forbid him to raise the dead!”

Herod then asks: “Where is this man?”

The reply comes from the messenger: “He is in every place, my Lord, but it is hard to find him.”

May he, my friends, find you today.

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