

John 20:1-18 (NRSV)

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Sometimes the truth is quite inconvenient and, not surprisingly, then ignored or suppressed. The Jerusalem crowds thought they understood quite well what happened on that Friday afternoon. But come Sunday, they would be caught up in THE inconvenient truth.

And so the crowds filed away. It had been quite a spectacle and yet disturbing in a way that other crucifixions had never been. Nonetheless, this Jesus’ dead body hung there on the cross with blood trailing down from where the Roman soldiers had stabbed it after death. Humiliated and scorned, this Jesus had ended up just one more in a long list of disappointments. It was over . . . time to go find a new horse to bet on.

Or so it seemed.

Resurrected or Resuscitated?

Sometimes, people mistakenly think of Jesus’ resurrection as some sort of resuscitation. When Jesus brought Lazarus back to life (John 11), it was a “resuscitation.” Lazarus was brought back to life as he had known it and went on to die again. He had not escaped death, but merely had it postponed.

But Jesus was not restored to the life and to the body he had known. Rather, Jesus passed through death to new life and a new physicality; he went to the other side of death and stayed there. Jesus no longer had a “soulish” body (*soma psychikon* in the original Greek) but a “Spirit-filled body” (*soma pneumatikon*, see 1 Cor 15:44).

In their stories about the risen Christ, the Gospel writers don’t try to explain all this, they simply tell what happened. Jesus was recognizable, though his appearance was slightly altered. He ate, but seemed to be able to pass through doors. When we recite the Apostles Creed, proclaiming the “resurrection of the body,” we look forward to the day when we too, like Jesus, will receive a transformed and glorified material body.

I'm sometimes asked why the disciples didn't "get it." Didn't they know that Jesus must rise from the dead? Hadn't he told them as much? In v.8 of his resurrection account, John reminds us that they did not yet understand. Frankly, it would have been odd if

they had.

"So that you may believe . . ."

John's gospel is the only one that tells us its explicit purpose – that the reader may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and, therefore, may have life in Jesus' name (20:30-31).

From end to end, this gospel is about believing, placing one's faith in Jesus as Lord and God. Then, and now, each person, man and woman, is asked, "Will you believe?"

In the gospel, one comes to believe in two seemingly contradictory ways. First, when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the night, Jesus uses the "language of faith, which implies a meaningful human decision to believe in Jesus, a decision that expresses one's conviction and moral intent . . . [there is] no fence straddling, one is in or out."¹ (see 3:16-21).

Yet, on the other hand, Jesus also uses the language of being born a second time, or better, born from above (3:1-10). A baby does not participate in its birth. Life is God's gift to the baby. In the same way, faith is a gift.

We often struggle with these seeming contradictions. We tend to insist that it must be an "either/or," in which faith results from either our free choice or God's gift. Yet, the Christian proclamation is grounded in true, but admittedly, challenging "ands." Our decision to believe is genuine and freely made, and it is a gift from God. Here's a couple more of the foundational "ands." Jesus is fully God and fully human. Not sometimes one and sometimes the other. Not half-and-half. Fully God and fully human. God is one, yet three. A unity of one and a community of three. One inherently relational God. How such things can be are beyond our reckoning. But our ability to understand something is not the measure of its truth.

1. D. Moody Smith, *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Jesus and all his disciples were devout Jews. For any first-century Jew, the Messiah was God's returning king who would usher in God's kingdom, doing so in power and might and wonder and glory, for all the world to see. Thus, even though Peter had confessed to Jesus that, yes, Jesus was the Messiah (Matt 16:16), Peter was completely bewildered and terrified when Jesus was arrested and tried.

Peter, and everyone else in Jerusalem, knew what the Romans did to would-be messiahs. The Romans crucified them in a most public demonstration of the fate that awaited anyone who challenged the authority of Rome. Here is the part that is most hard for us to comprehend 2,000 years later – to any first-century Jew, the fact that Jesus ended up dead on a Roman cross meant that he was surely not the Messiah! "Resurrected Messiah" simply wasn't in the Jewish vocabulary. Little wonder then that Mary mistook the risen Jesus for the gardener (v. 15)!

Only after Jesus appeared to the disciples and more than 500 others (1 Cor 15:6) and only after the Holy Spirit came to the disciples on Pentecost did they comprehend what had happened. Only then did they grasp that the Messiah's suffering and resurrection was fully in accordance with the Jewish scriptures. It was Jesus' resurrection that led them to proclaim: yes, Jesus was the Messiah. Yes, God's kingdom had come; not fully, but it had come. Yes, the resurrection had begun, though oddly so.¹

Inconvenient?

We turn a blind eye to the truth all the time, willfully. Harry "Give 'em hell" Truman once said, I don't give 'em hell; I just tell the truth and they think its hell." Telling the truth can

¹ First-century Jews expected that upon the arrival of the Messiah and God's kingdom, all God's people would be bodily resurrected – all of them, at one time. But Jesus' resurrection, accompanied by no others, meant that the resurrection had begun but was not completed. Hence, Paul describes Jesus as the "first fruits of those who have died" and promises that "all will be made alive in Christ . . . raised imperishable . . . in the twinkling of an eye."

be that way; it can turn our world upside down. Inconvenient is an understatement. And that is just how it is when it comes to the Jesus and his resurrection.

If Jesus was really and truly resurrected, then, yes, he is the long-awaited Messiah and truly the great “I am.” If he was not resurrected, there is no reason to place any of our faith in him, for, as Paul puts it, we’d be more pitiable than any, for we’d have believed a lie. But it did happen. Jesus was resurrected by God. The cross was truly the place of victory not of defeat. Every person must confront this claim and all the attendant challenges and joys that comes with faith in Christ.

Jesus taught his disciples to pray “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). Easter is the first great answer to that prayer. Our celebration of Easter reminds us that we and this world are God’s creations and that our future is grounded in this world. Easter is good news for us and the world precisely because it is about the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Our hope lies not in some spiritual escape into heaven, but the restoration and renewal of God’s world, “a new heaven and a new earth” (Isaiah 65:17; Rev 21:1). If we speak only of a “spiritual” resurrection, with Jesus’ body left in the tomb or stolen away, Christianity becomes about nothing more than some private, other-worldly salvation. Instead, borrowing N.T. Wright’s² phrase, resurrection makes us a “kingdom on earth as it is in heaven” people.

Bishop Wright puts it this way. “Let’s make no bones about it: if Easter isn’t good news then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.” Alleluia! Thank God for this inconvenient truth.

Us Too

Paul can hardly believe what he hears from the Corinthians. Deny Jesus’ resurrection!? In response, he lists witnesses who can testify to the truth of the claim. There are nearly 500 and most are still living, Paul writes. And, he goes on, if Jesus wasn’t bodily resurrected then Christianity is one big lie and the believers, all those who placed their faith in Jesus, are to be pitied. “If Christ has not been raised,” Paul writes, “your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

But there’s more. If Jesus wasn’t resurrected, then we won’t be resurrected ourselves. Thankfully, however, as Paul writes, “the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries . . . Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming” (from *The Message*). To translate it more literally, Jesus Christ is “the first fruits of the those who have died.” Jesus is the first to be resurrected, then when he returns, the rest of us will be resurrected too! THE REST OF US??!!

Yes, simply put, the creedal affirmation, “the resurrection of the body,” is not about Jesus’ resurrection, which we affirm earlier in the creed, it is about our own bodies. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised! Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that when the Last Days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of us. To use Paul’s agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the “first fruits,” God’s harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus’ resurrection. That doesn’t seem so fantastical only because we’ve gotten used to the idea. But once you’ve accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God into a small box that seems “reasonable” to us.

² N.T. Wright is a noted New Testament historian. This is from an article, “Why Easter Matters,” in his book, *For All God’s Worth*, Eerdmann’s, 1997.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Because the Christian claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected is so astounding and so counter to our own life experiences, many people are tempted to find a way around it. They want to build a Christian faith on a foundation of Jesus' "spiritual" resurrection and the disciples' "experiences" (read visions) of a risen Christ. Discuss why Jesus' bodily resurrection is so fundamental to our faith. Do you believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection? If so, why? What do we lose if we try to construct a Christianity without Jesus' bodily resurrection? Are we expected to accept the claims of Jesus' bodily resurrection in blind faith? The disciple "whom Jesus loved" looked in at the empty tomb and believed (v. 8). What do we see when we look at the empty tomb?
2. John's telling of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus outside the tomb is one of the most poignant scenes in the New Testament. She is seemingly lost in her grief until the moment when Jesus calls her by name, "Mary" (v. 16). Then she is swept up in her joy, grasping her Lord. But there is something larger here than even the intimacy of Mary's joy. Notice that Jesus doesn't tell her to return and say he had risen. Instead, Jesus instructs her to tell the others that he was returning to the Father as he had promised (John 14:28; 16:28). Jesus' coming ascension would mark the creation of the new believing community, in whom God's Holy Spirit, the comforter and advocate, would dwell. Discuss the ways in which the truth of the resurrection prepares us to be the community of faith. Why do so many people come to share in the joy of Easter morning, yet do not return to be a part of the community of believers on a regular basis?

Memory Verse of the Week

For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith; to the Jew first and also the Greek.

Romans 1:16

Paul knew that the story he told seemed crazy to most who heard it. A crucified God? A resurrected man? Absurd. . . . But Paul knew it was the truth and he told it to all who would listen. He urged them to embrace this story and this man, Jesus.

Scott's 11:00 Class in Festival Hall

The Rise of Christianity

How the obscure, marginal Jesus movement became the dominant religious force in the western world in a few centuries.

Mar 27: Lessons from the past

A new series begins April 3: *Who Will Be Saved?*

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

In God's Time: The Bible and the Future

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 every Tuesday. This week we continue our discussion of Revelation. Join us whenever you can.

Offering Christ: a study in the book of Acts

Scott's Monday evening class, beginning April 4, 6:45 in Piro Hall

Luke set out to write an "orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us . . . so that you may know the truth." His work encompasses two NT books: the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts. In the book of Acts, Luke tells the story of Christianity in the first decades after Jesus' resurrection. What does it mean to be a follower of Jesus? What constitutes a life of discipleship? How should the work of Jesus' followers move forward? What is their message? How did Jesus' followers grow from a small group of persecuted followers to a movement that spread across the Roman Empire? In this seven-week class, we'll see this tense story of God's work to bring about a new world, through the work of a renewed people empowered by God's Holy Spirit.

To register go to: http://www.standrewumc.org/ministries/learning/bible_academy/