

A Testimony of Resurrection

Earlier this morning, as we sat outside and watched the sun rise, we heard the Easter story from the Gospel of John.¹ In that account, Peter and the beloved disciple – we assume it was John – run into the empty tomb and see the linen cloths that had covered Jesus’ body, but they return to the place they’re staying without seeing Jesus. It’s Mary Magdalene who lingers, talks to two angels, and then encounters the risen Christ. When she rejoins the others, she testifies, “I have seen the Lord.”

Later that same day, Jesus appears to his followers who are hiding behind closed doors due to their fear of the religious authorities. Now Peter, John, and the others can testify, “We have seen the Lord.” But Thomas isn’t with them. It isn’t until a week later that he too is able to testify to the resurrection.²

For John, Easter is an unfolding story – filled with emotion and surprise, but happening in a calm, straightforward manner.

For Matthew, Easter is a seismic event – frightening and totally unsettling.³ The story begins quietly with two women named Mary arriving at the tomb. And then, BOOM, there’s an earthquake. They witness an angel descending from heaven, rolling away the stone, and sitting on it. This resurrection story includes lots of noise and drama.

As the two women are running to relay the angel’s words to the disciples, they’re astonished to run into Jesus. Their testimony of resurrection becomes stronger. Or is it even more unbelievable now?

The religious leaders don’t want the story to get out, so they concoct an alternate version, and pay the soldiers to spread it. The money must be good because this account doesn’t reflect well on the ones telling it. “Resurrection? No, that’s a fake story,” the soldiers report. “Don’t believe what those women are telling you. The truth is that Jesus’ disciples came at night and stole his body while we were sleeping.”⁴

I wonder how you would describe the events of Easter morning. I assume you’d talk about death, life, Jesus, and an empty tomb, but the other details would differ from person to person. And that’s to be expected. Because, when we go the original sources we have, the four Gospel accounts, we find that these eyewitnesses don’t agree on the details.

In Mark’s version, three women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body, find the stone has been rolled away, encounter a young man who tells them what happened, and run away without telling anyone.⁵ Unless, of course, you read the longer ending of Mark in which Mary Magdalene sees Jesus, tells the others, and no one believes her until he appears to two men in addition to the eleven remaining disciples.⁶ In Luke’s version, a group of women plan to anoint the body with spices, encounter two men in dazzling clothes, and run off to tell the other disciples, who don’t believe them until Peter checks out the empty tomb.⁷

Each of these ancient writers testifies to the resurrection but tells the story based on their personal experiences and the needs and backgrounds of their intended audience. Each of us does this too. When we tell our own version of the resurrection story, we tell the parts that connect with our experiences and our needs. We tell of how God meets us where we are.

Think of how Peter’s testimony of resurrection changed during his lifetime. He saw the risen Christ and declared that Jesus was the one the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been waiting for. When Jesus instructed him to “feed my sheep,” Peter knew he was talking about his Jewish brothers and sisters who were

¹ John 20:1-18

² John 20:19-29

³ Matthew 28:1-10

⁴ Matthew 28:11-15

⁵ Mark 16:1-8

⁶ Mark 6:9-20

⁷ Luke 24:1-12

now followers of Jesus.⁸ Peter's first sermons were addressed to "fellow Jews" and "fellow Israelites." Peter expected any Gentile who wanted to be part of the Jesus way to convert to Judaism and follow all its laws and customs.

But then he had a vision from God that abolished the Jewish laws of clean and unclean food. He encountered Cornelius, a Roman Centurion, a righteous man, a worshipper of God (big "G" God, not little "g" gods) who was well-respected by Jewish people. And his telling of the Easter story changed. Even those who don't convert to Judaism are included in the people of God. Listen again to Peter's testimony of resurrection.

It is clear to me now that God plays no favorites, that God accepts every person whatever his or her culture or ethnic background, that God welcomes all who revere Him and do right. You already know that God sent a message to the people of Israel; it was a message of peace, peace through Jesus the Anointed—who is King of all people. You know this message spread through Judea, beginning in Galilee where John called people to be ritually cleansed through baptism. You know God identified Jesus as the uniquely chosen One by pouring out the Holy Spirit on Him, by empowering Him. You know Jesus went through the land doing good for all and healing all who were suffering under the oppression of the evil one, for God was with Him. My friends and I stand as witnesses to all Jesus did in the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. The people of our capital city killed Him by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him up on the third day and made it possible for us to see Him. Not everyone was granted this privilege, only those of us whom God chose as witnesses. We actually ate and drank with Him after His resurrection. He told us to spread His message to everyone and to tell them that He is the One whom God has chosen to be Judge, to make a just assessment of all people—both living and dead. All the prophets tell us about Him and assert that every person who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name.⁹

I continue to find it difficult to imagine and explain the events of Easter morning. I've been around long enough to understand the laws of nature. I've studied and taught Biology. Even though our medical knowledge continues to expand rapidly. Even though we push the boundaries at both ends of life. In the end, we know that life has a beginning and an end. What has died remains dead.

And yet, I can testify to the resurrection. We can testify to the resurrection. We hit those moments when we think there is no way forward. When every normal expectation indicates that the story has ended in defeat. But then a spark of new life and possibility appears. We have this unimaginable, impossible promise that this isn't the end, that love, joy, and peace reign even if life doesn't continue as we expected. Even if we must reshape, redefine, or expand our understanding of the story. Even if death occurs.

Ten years ago on Easter Sunday we were remembering four deaths this congregation had experienced during the previous year – former pastor Val and three members, Janet, DonaJean, and Jim. Since then we've had more losses – Nancy, Susan, Lidia, Penny, Gary, and numerous other family members and friends.

When loved ones die, we can find comfort in the midst of our sorrow. We can replace guilt with acceptance and anger with peace. We can be thankful that the ones we love are free from the pain and struggle they were experiencing. We can give thanks while continuing to grieve and acknowledge the great loss in our lives.

I'm thinking about Trinity Mennonite Church in Hillsboro who is ending their time as a congregation today. I'm also remembering other churches that have closed: Morrison Mennonite Church where my mother and aunt grew up, my childhood church – Midway Mennonite, and our former sister congregation – Grace Mennonite Fellowship in Gladewater, TX.

When beloved institutions change, when congregations decline, even when churches close, there is the possibility of good news. The death or change of an institution isn't the end of ministry. It isn't the end of love. It isn't the end of grace. Buildings can be repurposed, money can fund something new, ministries can be reshaped, members can find new life in other settings.

This is the testimony of resurrection. This is what we celebrate today!

Thanks be to God for this indescribable gift!

⁸ John 21:15-19

⁹ Acts 10:34-43, *The Voice*