

What Difference Does it Make?@

Luke 24:1-12

EASTER

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I'm glad you're here! The Lenten Journey is complete. We made it through the long desert of reflection. Sometimes I imagine Lent as a kind of maze that we choose to enter, rather than taking a detour around it. We wander through the maze of spiritual reflection and wrestling, sometimes coming to places of light but often going a little further into dark places as we do the work of repentance and growth.

Then we go into a really dark week of Holy Week, bearing a willingness to at least sense, as much as we can, the burden Jesus carried on his way to the cross and his death. We come, willing to experience – at least in a small way – the emotional, passionate love that our Lord experienced, although we know we will never understand the full brunt of his suffering.

So Easter ends that long period. We burst out of the darkness and into the glorious light of resurrection. But what does it really mean? What do you expect from Easter? Are you here simply to celebrate and praise God for this amazing thing He has done through Jesus, his Son? That's certainly a good reason to come to worship!

Or are you here with a deep hope – a need to make sense of life in light of the resurrection? Are you here with some doubts, hoping to find faith in this amazing story?

For me, when I was growing up – especially as a young child – Easter meant having a beautiful new, fancy dress and an Easter bonnet and lacy socks and new shoes. My sisters and I loved dressing up for Easter.

We don't do that so much anymore, do we? At least not as elaborately as we used to. Which is good, I think. I remember going to Sunday School on Easter when I was maybe in the fifth or sixth grade. It was an all girl's class and one of the girls (whom I had always kind of envied because she had such pretty clothes) burst out crying right in the class because her new Easter dress, that had been ordered, hadn't come. She looked lovely, as usual, in the dress she had on! But she was miserable that Easter day because her new clothes had not arrived in time.

I think that was the first time I had a realization of how petty it was to put so much emphasis on clothes when that wasn't at all what Easter was about. That Easter was a turning point in my young life as I found myself being more serious about the real reason we were there. Not that I didn't know before, but it became very clear how important it was, compared to how unimportant the dress we wore was. It's still fun to dress up, and there's nothing wrong with it. I love seeing little children in their cute Easter duds.

But, Easter, of course, is a celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. It is a stunning story that, if we think about it, is almost impossible to believe. And yet, many of us do choose to believe. We have somehow had that faith instilled in us.

How did you come to believe? Was it something you were taught by your parents, or a Sunday School teacher? Was it – possibly – a sermon you heard?

For me, it was all of those things, yet just hearing it doesn't always equal belief. The women went to the tomb, finding it empty, and hearing from the angels that Jesus had risen. They remembered his words and believed.

But they ran back to tell the disciples and at that hearing, they – all but Peter – did not believe. In fact, the disciples said the women were telling “idle tales.” The Greek word – *leros* - translates as delirious. They thought the women – these first evangelists – were out of their minds.

Peter did at least listen and ran to the tomb to see for himself. He did find it empty, except for those burial cloths lying there where Jesus had laid. And Luke tells us Peter went away amazed. We aren't told that he immediately believed any more than the other men who had followed Jesus closely for three years; who had been told at least three times that Jesus would die, would be buried, but would rise from the dead in three days.

For most of the disciples, it took Jesus showing up among them, to convince them that what the women had said was true. And then, they remembered all that Jesus had told them.

For some, belief in the resurrection is immediate. For others, it is a slow realization that somehow, in God's amazing power and love, resurrection is true. There is no judgment here on how long it takes to believe it. But, my prayer is that each of you will believe it.

What I think is most important in anything that has to do with faith, is that we come ready and willing, with an open heart for the Holy Spirit to plant those seeds of belief deep inside of us. Because that is really where it comes from.

David Lose writes in his commentary on resurrection: “Faith, after all, isn't knowledge. Rather, faith, as the author to the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1).

“And perhaps Easter Sunday is as good a time as any to give God thanks for the gift of faith, the ability not to understand the mystery of the resurrection but to be inspired to hope and believe that it is true.”

But what difference does it make if we believe that Jesus was resurrected from the dead? Of course, our greatest hope is in eternal life – that in the death of Christ on the cross we have forgiveness of sins and that in His being raised from the dead, we too, have the assurance of life after death – life with God eternally.

I could not be a pastor, and preach any good news, if I did not believe in resurrection and eternal life. I don't know what I would say to comfort and give assurance and hope.

But, there is more to resurrection than eternal life. If that were all, it would have been enough, right? But in this resurrection comes new life now – today – and for the future.

Because of the resurrection, we do not have to live in the fear that Isis, or even the media, or the politicians try to plant in our minds and hearts. Does that mean there is no threat? No violence? No corruption?

Oh, it's there alright. Every day we see it but we don't have to be bound up by it. We have a different view – a view that we see through the eyes of the One who loved the world so much that He gave His life for us. We see hate and we hear toxic, crude bullying; we see war and oppression but we need not let all that rule our lives.

Yes, what we have in resurrection changes us and causes us to work for peace; to pray for peace; to stand for justice; to speak out for the oppressed; to give to those who are marginalized; to love as Christ loved.

But we who have been changed into a new creation because of resurrection do not have to live into the world's hate and hopelessness. We know that the power of God who can raise the dead, can also raise us up even if we die. But that same power can overcome hate with love; can change hearts; can work all things for good, as Paul says in Romans 8.

Karoline Lewis, in her commentary at workingpreacher.com, writes about John's version of the resurrection, where Mary sees Jesus at the empty tomb and runs back to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

She writes this about resurrection: "I have seen the Lord" insists that the ways of love will win over the ways of hate. "I have seen the Lord" confirms that the truth of kindness can be heard over the din of ruthless, callous, and vindictive rhetoric.

"I have seen the Lord" gives witness to the fact that there is another way of being in the world -- a way of being that is shaped by resurrection, that embodies anything and everything that is life-giving, a way of being that is so counter-cultural, so demonstrative of mercy, so exemplary of the truth of Easter that others will listen to you, watch you, wonder about you and say, "Wait a minute. Did I just see the Lord?"

I shared a post on Facebook this week that I liked and think it goes with this sermon title. It has a picture of the three crosses – empty now – and the question is asked "How Big is Easter?"

And the answer: "Oh, it's only the answer to pretty much everything!"

As the hymn that we are about to sing proclaims: Christ is risen! Raise your spirits from the caverns of despair. Walk with gladness in the morning. See what love can do – and dare.

Drink the wine of resurrection, not a servant but a friend. Jesus is our strong companion, joy and peace shall never end.

Break the bread of new creation where the world is still in pain. Tell its grim, demonic chorus: "Christ is risen! Get you gone!" God the first and last is with us. Sing Hosanna, everyone!"

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! ***(Christ is Risen! Shout Hosanna!)***