

Do We Really Believe?

Isaiah 25:6-9 CEB On this mountain, the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavor, of choice wines well refined. ⁷ He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, the shroud enshrouding all nations. ⁸ He will swallow up death forever. The LORD God will wipe tears from every face; he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth, for the LORD has spoken. ⁹ They will say on that day, "Look! This is our God, for whom we have waited-- and he has saved us! This is the LORD, for whom we have waited; let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

^{CEB} **John 20:1** Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him."

³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. ⁹ They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

¹¹ Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. ¹³ The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." ¹⁴ As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.

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At the time of Jesus it was a man's world. Women were only worth a bit more than animals. That was more or less the situation for centuries before and for centuries to follow. But, when we read the gospel accounts of Christ's crucifixion, we're told that it was women who stayed at the cross despite the gory torture, despite the political risk of caring about a convicted felon. They had stood near the cross as Jesus had been executed by a powerful, vengeful empire that would just as soon nail them to their own crosses as blink an eye. The women would not let Jesus die alone. They would not let his spirit, his essence die. They would not let his memory die. And so, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb on that first Easter morning. She expected nothing more than a cold body that needed the final attention of loving hands. Instead, there was no body, but lots of questions.

The author, Flannery O'Connor, wrote a short story titled "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." One of the characters in the story is referred to as the Misfit. He says, "If [Jesus] did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and

if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can." There, in the simplest terms, is the question we face. Either the resurrection is true or it isn't, and your belief about it will change everything. Except, for most of us, it hasn't. We tend to put the resurrection into a sealed compartment with things we think we are supposed to believe but are perplexing and hard to understand or envision. So we seal them away and only open the compartment briefly once a year. And then we dress the holiday up with Easter eggs, chocolate bunnies, a nice ham for dinner, and other distractions so that we don't have to think about resurrection too deeply. When it comes to the resurrection, a lot of us don't believe very much, very deeply, or very often.

Many people have a problem accepting the idea that Jesus was dead for three days and then raised to a new life. It sounds too farfetched to believe. Even some Christians quietly wonder how that could have really happened. They keep quiet about their doubts, holding on to the church for its fellowship, high moral teachings, and everything else about Jesus that they admire and can believe.

Perhaps we put too much negative baggage on doubt. As we saw last week, even the disciples who had spent three years with Jesus often misunderstood his message. They had been bumbling followers. They didn't understand the parables. They didn't understand the teachings. They expected Jesus to act like other people. They wanted to call down fire and brimstone on a Samaritan village. They shooed children and blind beggars away from Jesus. They failed to understand why Jesus rode a young donkey down the hill to Jerusalem. The disciples didn't "get it" a good deal of the time. And they were fearful, even when Jesus was right there in the boat with them.

That first Easter morning, finding an empty tomb, Mary Magdalene went and told Peter and John. They ran back to the garden, saw the empty tomb, scratched their heads and went back home. Mary stuck around. She saw angels and then saw Jesus and talked with him. Did this really happen, or was it just a vision? *Just* a vision? Maybe a vision means seeing that which is more real than anything else. Don't tell Paul that his vision on the road to Damascus wasn't real. For that matter, don't tell a war veteran with PTSD that his or her dreams and visions aren't real. There is much in life that may not be physical fact but is more real than cold hard facts.

Whether you believe the Bible stories literally or figuratively, those beliefs ought to make a difference in your life. The resurrection story, however we understand it, whether or not we can explain it, should make a difference in our minds and hearts. It certainly changed the early disciples!

After the crucifixion the disciples were overwhelmed by grief, disappointment, and confusion. They were in their own tomb of defeat and despair. The Jesus movement was as dead as its leader. But after the resurrection they were awestruck, amazed, empowered, and bold. All that Jesus taught and lived was vindicated. Now the disciples came alive -- truly alive! After the resurrection they were fearless. They preached boldly. They cared for the poor and powerless. They left their comfort zone of Palestine. They welcomed Gentiles. They lived life fully, abundantly, meaningfully.

The great weapon of the Roman Empire was fear, and when the disciples lost their fear, the message of Christ was turned lose in the world. Even the fear of death was gone, because they understood that God was with them in life, more than that, God was with them through death, and into a new existence beyond. Resurrection stands up against the forces of sin and death. It declares hope over despair. It tells us that no matter what happens to us, the end of things isn't really the end of things.

The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus doesn't end with the empty tomb. Resurrection isn't an ending – it's an invitation, inviting us, calling us to live

resurrection lives and continue the story of God's love and redemption. Jesus stood for freedom, equality, dignity, wisdom, courage, and compassion. He had worked to change the world, to make the last first, to free the captives and restore sight to the blind. He served God and cared for the downtrodden and gave no thought to cultural traditions or government disapproval.

Mark's gospel opens with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ . . ." It's the beginning of what God has done and is still doing through Jesus Christ. Mark never announces the end of the good news of Jesus Christ. God isn't done yet – and neither are we. We're called to get out of our seats and share the good news of Jesus' identification with the suffering and his triumph over injustice and death.

We're all called to be like Mary Magdalene – to go to the places of vengeful violence, to situations of oppression and death. We're to go to the tombs of oppression, bigotry, hate, vengeance, self-centeredness, and shallowness. A life without love has little meaning, but Jesus showed us how to love even enemies. A life without compassion is shallowly narcissistic, but Jesus showed us how to have compassion on a common criminal, even in the midst of his own suffering on the cross. A life without sacrifice is cheapened, but Jesus showed us how to lead by being a servant to others.

Resurrection caused an uprising of hope, not hate, an uprising armed with love, not weapons, an uprising that shouts a joyful vision of life and peace, not angry threats of hostility and death. It is so much better than what the disciples and the crowds had expected. Resurrection, however it happened, however the disciples experienced Jesus in the weeks after the crucifixion - in whatever form it took, resurrection totally transformed the disciples, resurrecting their courage, enlightening their understanding, filling them with life abundant in purpose and meaning. Resurrection was good news, and it's still good news today. Each of us is to be a witness to the resurrection, a witness to the transforming power of the resurrection. There's nothing for us to do but throw off our own chains of fear, rise from our own tombs of smallness and pettiness, and live as resurrected people, showing and sharing the good news! Amen.

Hear the good news!
He is risen!
Fear not!
He brings forgiveness undeserved,
encouragement unexpected,
and new life to celebrate with joy!