

An Easter Faith in a Good Friday World

a sermon by Rev. J. Mark Worth

READING: From 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. *This is the earliest written explanation of Easter.*

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred people at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

THE SERMON

Here is an Easter story: Jennifer, not her real name, had an incredibly difficult childhood. Her father left home when she was in the second grade. It appears that he may have been involved in some shady business dealings. He may also have despaired of ever living in harmony with Jennifer's mother, for Jennifer's mother had a mental illness that caused both mood problems and a loss of contact with reality. When Jennifer was seven or eight years old she became her mother's primary caregiver.

Jennifer developed various coping mechanisms to deal with her complicated home life, but one day her mother was just so difficult that nothing seemed to work. Jennifer, not knowing what else to do, went outside and sat on the front steps of her apartment and cried. As she was sitting there, crying, a man came up to her and said, "Are you okay?"

She politely said that, yes, she was okay, although in reality she wasn't. As she looked up at the man the sun was behind him, giving the impression that he had a halo. She thought, "An angel has come to help me."

He sat down with her and held her hand. When he sat down she could see that he was just a regular human being. Yet somehow her initial impression, that he was an angel, stayed with her.

He said, "I know your mother." No more than that. And he listened to her story.

Many times since then she has remembered when the man sat and held her hand and listened. The memory has been a source of strength to her. Now she is an intelligent, well-adjusted young woman with an impressive resume, and a passion to help build a better world. When I met her a few years ago, she was a grad student at an Ivy League school.

To me, Jennifer's story is a kind of resurrection story. Her childhood could have been the kind of childhood that left her crippled. It might have crushed her spirit, but somehow it didn't. She managed to find the resources and the relationships that sustained her life. At crucial moments in her life, "angels" – like the man who held her hand and listened to her story – appeared in her life to help her along the way.

A resurrection mystery ~

Today is Easter Sunday, the day for resurrections. The word "Easter" is not found anywhere in the Bible. It's actually a Pagan word. Easter is named for Eostre, or Ostara, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of the East and Springtime. The word "estrogen" comes from her name. We've passed the Vernal Equinox and entered into Spring. Springtime brings fertility, hence the season is associated with eggs and rabbits.

Some day soon, we hope, we will see flowers in bloom – although Spring arrives late in

the U.P, the crocuses and daffodils will open – the buds on the trees *will* open, the leaves will bloom, and the birds will be singing. This is, indeed, a season of resurrection!

Despite having a Pagan name, Easter is the highest of Christian holy days. The story of the resurrection of Jesus has long been a puzzle to me. While none of us can go back in a time machine to that first Easter, many people have opinions. Many people are certain that, as the Christian creeds say, Jesus rose bodily from the dead. And many others are equally certain, as Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan says, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time, brings dead people back to life.”

Yet *something* happened. Jesus was dead. His disciples were in despair. And then something happened that completely changed their outlook. They somehow, in some way, believed they had experienced Jesus’ living presence among them again.

Did a miracle occur? In the ancient world miracles were associated with all great men – including Pythagoras, Alexander the Great, Caesar Augustus, Moses, the Buddha, Laozi, and Muhammad, as well as Jesus. If you were great, you performed miracles. That’s the way people thought in ancient times.

Did a miracle occur? My mother had a vision of my father six years after he died. He walked into the living room, talked with my mother, then walked into the back of the house. She followed him, but he ad vanished.

My friend Helen also told me about seeing her husband, and talking with him, after he had died. For my mother, and for Helen, these were very *real* experiences.

And something profound happened to the followers of Jesus. The Easter story is not to be dismissed out of hand. Something happened to the disciples that changed *everything* for them!

The Easter story is told five times in the New Testament, and the versions disagree on the details – how many people went to the tomb, who they were, whether they went before or after sunrise, whether they saw one angel or two, whether they saw Jesus or not, who Jesus appeared to first. In one Gospel the angel tells Mary Magdalene that Jesus is not there (Mark 16:6-7). But in another Gospel Jesus *is* right there at the tomb, and he talks with Mary Magdalene (John 20:14-18). Thomas Paine said that if the four gospel writers testified in court, and contradicted one another as much as they do in the Bible, their testimony would be thrown out by the judge.

In fact, none of the Four Gospels are eyewitness accounts. Traditionally the authors of the Gospels are said to have been named Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, but we don’t really know who wrote the Gospels. They were written anonymously, and the names were added later.

But then maybe it doesn’t matter. The Gospels are not history; they are testimonies of faith.

From tragedy to triumph ~

We *do* know who Paul was, and we are confident he wrote at least nine books of the New Testament. Paul’s story of the resurrection is the earliest and the simplest. He doesn’t say that the stone was rolled away, or that the tomb was empty, or even if there was a tomb or a stone. He doesn’t say that an angel announced the resurrection. He merely says that Jesus died, was buried, was raised from the dead on the third day; and that he appeared to Peter, and to the Twelve, and to many others. That’s all. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

Paul wrote his account about twenty years after Jesus died, and he admits he was *not*

there on that first Easter. But he did know the Disciples Peter and John, and he knew James, the brother of Jesus.

Next, after Paul's account, comes the anonymous Gospel we call Mark, also not an eyewitness account, written about forty years after the crucifixion. Mark's Gospel adds the empty tomb, and the stone that was rolled away. Still, Mark's Gospel ended without any resurrection appearances by Jesus. (The earliest copies end at Mark 16:8.)

Matthew and Luke, whoever they were, took Mark's Gospel and tried to improve on it by adding resurrection appearances. And John's Gospel, written sixty or more years after the crucifixion, goes still further. In John, Jesus cooks breakfast, and even appears from out of nowhere in a locked room (John 20:19-29). So, like a fish story, the resurrection story seems to grow and become more miraculous as the decades pass!

But for now, let's put the various accounts of the resurrection to one side. These are *symbolic* stories, not literal history. To me the real miracle of Easter is that it is possible for a tragedy to become a triumph. What we would expect to be the end, isn't the end.

Because I take the Bible seriously, I cannot take all of it literally. I could not take it seriously if I had to take all of it literally.

But even if we were to read the Bible literally, we discover that when Jesus showed up on Easter his friends often didn't recognize him at first. Mary Magdalene thought she was speaking to the gardener (John 20:14-18). In John 21:4, the Disciples went fishing, and Jesus stood on the shore and carried on a conversation with them, but they did not recognize him at first. Two Disciples going to Emmaus walked for several miles with Jesus, and yet they didn't know who he was until they sat down to eat, and Jesus blessed the meal and vanished (Luke 24:15-31).

If Jesus had been raised *bodily* from the grave, why didn't his own Disciples know who he was? This is why many scholars say that the Easter resurrection is *not* about the resuscitation of a corpse. Jesus is not a Zombie, not the walking dead. It is a mystical experience, a vision, not a biological event. It's something similar to my mother's vision of my father after he died.

Resurrection happens ~

So, no, I don't take these stories completely literally, but do I think something *did* happen. The women and men who followed Jesus experienced *something* profound. Out of tragedy came a triumph. Out of death came life. Out of an ending came a new beginning.

Did a miracle occur? Rev. Robert Hardies of All Souls Unitarian Church, Washington, D.C., says, "As I see it, my job on Easter Sunday is not to convince you that the resurrection happened, but to remind you that it happens. ... The way I look at it, each and every one of us in this room this morning is proof positive of the resurrection. For whom among us doesn't have a story to tell, a very personal story, of rebirth, of emerging from the tomb of depression or despair, pain or addiction? Who among us can't point to a time in our lives when all seemed lost, and then suddenly hope returned? ... You, *you*, are witness to your very own resurrections. What other proof do you need?"

Did a miracle occur? Remember Jennifer. She went from being a fragile little girl who was despairing how do deal with her mother's mental illness, and became a competent, capable, compassionate young woman studying at an Ivy League university. That's a resurrection.

I love the song "The Mary Ellen Carter." written by Canadian folk singer Stan Rogers.

I've always thought of it as some kind of modern Easter hymn. Stan Rogers tells the story of the Mary Ellen Carter, a boat that sank in a storm. The company that owned the boat wrote it off for the insurance, but members of the crew thought it was worth it to try to re-float the Mary Ellen Carter. The chorus goes,

“Rise again! Rise again! Let her name not be lost to the knowledge of men!
Those who loved her best and were with her 'til the end
Will make the Mary Ellen Carter rise again!”

At the end of the story Stan Rogers adds these words:
“And you, to whom adversity has dealt the final blow
With smiling bastards lying to you everywhere you go
Turn to, and put out all your strength of arm and heart and brain
And like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!
Rise again! Rise again!
Though your heart it be broken and life about to end
No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love, a friend,
Like the Mary Ellen Carter, rise again!”

In Jesus' day many people in Israel and the Galilee, oppressed by wealthy landowners and ruled by a Roman dictator, were looking for a Messiah who would sit on King David's throne, re-gather the lost tribes of Israel, and restore Israel to independence and glory. Swords would be made into plow-share and spears into pruning hooks. Lions and lambs would lie down together peacefully. The Messiah would usher in the age of God's peace and justice.

Many thought Jesus was that Messiah. And his followers were disappointed, heartbroken, when he was executed on a cross just like any common criminal. It looked as though God had lost and Caesar had won.

Yet somehow that wasn't the end of the story. Somehow there was triumph that came out of defeat. The Easter experience affirms that transformation is possible on the other side of suffering; not just pie in the sky in the sweet by-and-by, but here, today, in this life.

So, what if those who experienced Jesus alive among them were somehow right? What if the crucifixion on Friday isn't the end of the story? What if the Mary Ellen Carter can rise from its watery grave? What if poverty, the loss of a job, an illness, or the death of a loved one, isn't the end for you? What if addiction isn't the final word? What if prejudice and fear can be overcome? What if justice can be found? What if a hurt child can grow into a healthy and confident adult? What if there *is* resurrection?

On Friday there is only death and sorrow, but on Sunday there is resurrection and hope. That is the possibility Easter presents: an Easter faith in a Good Friday world.

We can debate what happened that first Easter, or the vision my mother had of my father, but we can't test it in a laboratory. Resurrection isn't a scientific proposition to be proved or disproved; it's an experience. So, let us be agents of resurrection, activists for resurrection. Good Friday isn't the end of the story! Winter isn't the end of the story – springtime is in the air! All of our senses can testify to that fact. The birds are on the wing, the crocuses and daffodils are ready to bloom, and children are dancing and singing! Go forth and be agents of resurrection!

...Amen.