

Scripture: Luke 24. 1-12

The first *Christian* sermon ever preached was not well received. Indeed it was not even believed. When the women came back from the cemetery on that first Easter morning, they proclaimed the amazing word of an empty tomb and preached the gospel given to them by two angels: "He is not here but has risen!" But those gathered together did not believe the women. They thought, according to the Greek words, the women were making it all up, were full of nonsense, were telling idle tales, were delirious.

So that first Easter morning, no one greeted the news that God raised Jesus from the grave and defeated death and evil, with shouts of "Hallelujah, Praise God, Christ is Risen, Shout Hosanna." Absolutely no one, upon hearing the news that death itself could not hold the Lord of Glory captive, said, "I knew it, this is just like he told us it would be!" No - there were no "Whoo Hoo's" that day. The women were perplexed and then terrified and the men thought the women were nuts.

And Easter *is* perplexing, and believing in the resurrection is difficult, isn't it? We've never seen or experienced anything like it. We have always been told that there are two things you can be sure of in life: death and taxes. We know taxes and we know death – it is all around us. We have watched plants, animals and people die. And if the dead don't *stay* dead, what can you count on? So who can blame the disciples? There were good reasons for the women to be cautious, perplexed, and even frightened. There were good reasons for the men to be unbelieving.

Resurrection breaks all the rules, and while most of us will admit that the rules aren't perfect – and sometimes even downright awful – at least we know them. They are predictable and scientific, a known quantity, and in that sense, comforting. And resurrection upsets all of that.

Resurrection throws off the balance, rocks the boat, upsets the apple cart, and generally turns our neat and orderly lives totally out of whack. So if you don't find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you probably aren't taking it very seriously! To believe in the Resurrection, you have to be a little "delirious," a little crazy. It's for that reason I am so thankful for Disciples of Christ, where questions are encouraged and doubting is given respect. The roots of faith cannot deepen and strengthen, if doubt is never allowed space in the church.

The biblical authors believed that faith and doubt are woven quite closely together. Doubt, questions, even downright skepticism – these aren't the opposite of faith, but rather an essential ingredient to faith. Faith, after all, isn't knowledge or a book full of facts.

Rather, faith, as the author to the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). Faith, by definition, is not like math or science – there is not one neat and tidy answer in black and white. Faith is many answers and *more questions* in every color under heaven where we are not sure where one color ends and another starts. Resurrection faith came slow to most of the disciples. But when it came, it changed everything.

It all began in the dark. The women went back to the place where they watched Joseph of Arimathea lay Jesus' body after wrapping it in a linen cloth on Friday evening just before sundown. When they arrived at the tomb early Sunday morning, the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty.

Two men bathed in white who are later called angels appear and tell the women to *remember* what Jesus told them when he was with them. And then they did remember his words. The word “to remember” in Greek (*mimneskomai*) is not found in any of the other Gospel accounts of the empty tomb, but it is found all through the Old and New Testaments. God remembers God’s people and God’s covenant and remembers our sin no more.

This same word was used by a criminal on the cross, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (23:42). Jesus calls us to remember at the Last Supper (22:19), “*do this in remembrance of me.*” Remember me, said the criminal. Remember me, said Christ. Remember Him, said the angels.

“Remember?” we often say to each other. We have to remember facts for a test, the names of people so we won’t be embarrassed, the time and place of our meeting. But is that what the criminal, Jesus and the angels mean? Does the criminal just want Jesus to recall the good time they had together dying on crosses right next to each other? “Hey, don’t forget me alright?” Does Jesus just want us to recall his death every time we eat bread? Do the angels just want the women to recall that Jesus laid out for them what would happen so they wouldn’t be frightened? What does it mean to “remember”?

This “remembering” is more than just thinking about or recalling a fact or event or person. This “remembering” requires some action in the here and now and some change moving into the future. Remembering requires our participation. It is integrating something or someone from the past into the present in a way that moves us forward as new beings, as changed people. The criminal did not just want Jesus to recall that life-changing day they spent together. He wanted to be with Jesus, he wanted Jesus to put in a good word with God, to give him a chance, to know his heart and to take some action in his favor. Jesus promised that they would be together in paradise.

Jesus did not just want us to recall his suffering as we eat bread – but to bring his model of sacrifice and his spirit into our lives and to live differently because of Him. The angels did not just want to take away the women’s fear. They wanted the women to recall all that Jesus had taught them, all that they had witnessed and felt, and to live that out in their lives and to tell others – to proclaim the Good News of Jesus.

Christian preaching began when the women told what they saw (and did not see) at the tomb and when they shared the message of the angels, “He is risen! Remember what he told you?” Christianity began by remembering what Jesus taught. Every lesson, every sermon, every hymn, every prayer begins by remembering. By remembering what God has done through Christ Jesus.

Many of us today are what they call “functional atheists.” We function as if there is no God. Even if we claim a belief in Jesus, we function as if he died on the cross and that was the end of the story. We may attend church regularly or occasionally, but we function as if we do not “remember.”

Resurrection is quite unbelievable. I imagine that everyone in this room has at one time or another questioned and even doubted the resurrection. As told by the Gospel writers, it is not really even much of a story when you come right down to it. Some women went to anoint the body of their teacher and found the tomb empty, met some guys in white who told them to remember. It doesn't have the emotion of a great drama. Surely if the Gospel writers were trying to persuade the world to believe in the resurrection they would have added a little more

excitement and suspense. If they were trying to convince us, surely they would have made it a bit more believable.

But that is part of its power – isn't it? The Gospel writers seem to be telling it simply the way it was, as fragmented, confusing, shadowy, and incomplete as life itself. Exactly what happened, cannot be known with certainty. But what if we lived as if it did happen? What if we lived as if we remembered the Resurrection of Jesus? What if death is real, but not final? What if Jesus is not merely past but present? What would happen if I were to tell others the gospel message?

The women, after remembering, proclaim the gospel to the apostles. After the risen Jesus breaks bread with the two men in Emmaus and they remember, they rush back to Jerusalem to tell others. After Jesus appeared to the group in Jerusalem, he told them that they were witnesses of these things and they began a gospel movement...and 2,000 years later, here we are.

To believe in the resurrection of Jesus takes a lot of faith and some courage these days, but it does not require full understanding or total certainty. It is more than saying yes to the claim made by the women and, eventually, the men. It is saying "no" to the power of death and destruction that surrounds us. In place of the bad news we hear, we make the claim that there is a sustaining Power who brings life out of death, light out of darkness, and peace out of suffering. To live resurrection takes confidence in hope and joy, optimism and delight. Resurrection requires being comfortable with only knowing in part, with letting go of certainty, with resting in mystery. It requires faith and trusting in advance with what will only make sense in reverse.

Through resurrection, God created a new reality; overthrowing death, sin, and all that could oppress us; and declaring once and for all that life is more powerful than death and love more enduring than tragedy. Death does not have the final word. Love and life are stronger than fear. We can expect to see those we've loved and lost again. God has a future in store for each and all of us and anything is possible with God.

The Easter message calls us from our old belief in death to a new belief in life. The claim that the tomb could not hold Jesus, and the idea that the one who died by crucifixion has now risen is so outrageous that it makes us wonder if it might--just might--be true. The apostles seemed convinced that the message was nonsense, nothing more than "an idle tale." Death was death. Yet the message was so outrageous that Peter had to go and take a look for himself. He wondered, "What if it is true?" What if it is true?