

“What Difference Does It Make?”

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24

Matthew 28:1-10; Colossians 3:1-4

I reflect this morning upon all of the Easter services I attended with my family growing up. Something special was in the air about this day. Of course, there were family gatherings and a special meal. We bought new clothes to wear to church. Everybody was dressed up. The church was decorated with beautiful flowers. The pastor was more animated than usual, celebrating and proclaiming that death has been defeated, Jesus is risen! Then it was all over.

I don't recall conversations surrounding the meaning of it all afterward. Food had to be cooked and served. Conversations turned to sports, politics, or local gossip. Life returned to normal.

I am reminded of the story told of the old days in Russia. At Easter the great and the lowly would embrace one another on Easter morning. As we do, one person would exclaim, “Christ is risen!” The other would reply, “He is risen indeed!” When it was all over they would go their separate ways, relapsing into old prejudices and injustices. Suspended for a moment in time, the possibility of a different world, the social structure was transformed by jubilant embracing across class and economic distinctions. Then the rubber band snapped back to where it had been and was committed to stay.

We live in a world where economic disparity, social and educational distinction, political differences, and lives committed to the status quo dominate. On this Easter Sunday the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. For many wages have been stagnant for a couple of decades, jobs are disappearing, and artificial intelligence is poised to eliminate more jobs. MIT economist Erik Brynjolfsson portrays a world where computers entrench the power of a wealthy elite and push the majority into poverty (Nick Heath, “Why AI could destroy more jobs than it creates, and how to save them”).

Does it matter to our world, does it matter to you, that Christ is risen this Easter morning? Does Christ's resurrection have anything to do with our economic and social justice inequities? Does the resurrection change the choices I make and the life that I choose to live and how I live it? Will we leave only to return to business as usual? Or are we sentenced to the cynicism of Voltaire, who chides that Easter is “a feast celebrated by Christians in remembrance of a God who was publically hanged...feeding on their God, doubtless to ascertain if, like the phoenix, He will spring into life from that which has devoured him” (IB, vol. 7, p.618). From the valley of the shadow where we live on this earth, is there hope from beyond that can lift our sights and actually alter our perspective and provide a new vision for living?

There is no question that Paul is right, “For now we see in a mirror, dimly... Now I know only in part” (1 Corinthians 13:12). On that first Easter morning both Mary's go to see the tomb where Jesus has been laid. It is what we do when we go to the cemetery to place flowers on the grave of a loved one. There is no expectation for what they were about to experience. Jesus is dead, locked and sealed in a tomb. Hope for anything else is outside the realm of possibility.

Their perspective is about to change. As they arrive there is a great earthquake. An angel descends from heaven, rolls away the stone and sits on it. Matthew tells us that the angel's appearance is like lightening and his garment white as snow. Those guarding the tomb are shaken with fear and become as dead people. They are placed there by the authorities so that Jesus' disciples could not come and steal the body. After all, Jesus had foretold his suffering and resurrection, so this is precautionary.

Both of the women had been there at the cross. They had been there when Jesus was placed in the tomb. Their love and commitment to him went deep. Perhaps this is the reason news of the resurrected Lord appears to them first. The angel addresses the women; "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he is risen, as he said he would. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him. This is my message to you'".

What message is God giving us this Easter morning? Perhaps it is not dissimilar to the one that the two Mary's receive. Implicit in the angel's message is the call to believe. Jesus is being true to his promise. He is not here. He is risen. There is no need for fear. I imagine them thinking, "Is it too good to be true? Is this really happening?" Even as we hear the news of Christ risen this morning we are being invited to enter into and experience a whole new reality. Aren't you asking at a deeper level if this is actually true? Or maybe you are thinking that it sounds nice but is it actually so.

Secondly, they are being sent to share their experience with the disciples where they will find them in Galilee. They move quickly, embraced by many emotions swirling around in them. Matthew describes the polarities of joy and fear intermixed within. It is an overwhelming experience.

What do we share? We share his resurrected life at work in us with others. We tell others about what Jesus has done and is doing in our lives. We offer them the love, grace, and healing that we have received from him.

I remember that period in my life as a 19 year old when Easter became real for me for the first time. The love and grace I was experiencing through Christ's resurrection and the presence of his Spirit redirected friendships, the morals and ethics of my living, and gave me a whole new set of questions to ask regarding major life decisions. And I must add, the living Christ in me still challenges and guides my life decisions through his wisdom. What can one do but share that reality with others?

Timothy Keller, in his book, "The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism", goes to the heart of what is happening. "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that he said; if he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what he said? The issue on which everything hangs is not whether or not you like his teaching but whether he rose from the dead" (Penguin, 2009).

Christianity is not a revelation about how to live. It is foremost about the life, death, and resurrection of this man, Jesus. The Synoptic Gospels reach a high point in the middle of their narrative. This is when Peter is faced with Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" For Christian theology all other questions are subordinate to this one question, "Who is Jesus?"

To those in Corinth questioning the viability of Jesus' resurrection, Paul retorts; "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain...If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Corinthians 15:12-17).

Let me put it this way. For Christianity, what is parallel to the Torah as the fundamental revelation in Judaism, or the Koran in Islam, is not the Bible but Jesus Christ himself. The Bible is a witness to him, his life, death, and resurrection. In a conversation with the religious leaders, after he tells them that God's word does not abide in them because of their disbelief in who he is, Jesus says, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:38-40).

In Colossians Paul tells us that we live in this world even while our lives are grounded in another. Our real life is hidden in the world above. "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God". We live in that tension between the "now" but "not yet".

It does make a difference in how we choose to live if Christ is risen. Maria-Jose Soerens, a Christian mental- health counselor serving undocumented immigrants in Seattle, was asked, "What would it mean if Christians in the U.S. recognized immigrants as dialogue partners?" Because of Christ in us, "It would mean seeing them as legitimate neighbors and protecting them and their families...Will we work at the service of our fear or at the service of Jesus, who tells us to love our neighbor...I go to the detention center in Tacoma, WA., which is like any detention center: very oppressive conditions, daily human rights violations...But the faith is alive; people believe that God is showing up for them and they get together to do Bible study...And I'm thinking: the Church in North America needs to hear you" (Sojourners, March 2017, p. 25).

And so we are challenged to live with a resurrection perspective. Everything about us is affected; body, mind, conscience, emotions, reason, and will. We commit our lives to God and the things of God, who becomes the "manager" of all other dimensions of life. Our focus on Christ keeps all things in perspective, launching a new way of thinking in which as a believer we look to Christ for what we think and do.

As a young 19 year old Christian I began asking what God wanted me to do, praying for God's guidance, looking to Jesus for how to act, seeking Christian support and fellowship through the church, Christ's body, finding places where Christ wanted me to serve, and seeking the welfare of others before my own. All of this would be moot if Jesus is not risen. Now I cannot even imagine what my life would have been like apart from the resurrected Christ (Homiletics, April-May 2017, PP. 53-4).

As we step out in faith we experience Jesus greeting us as he did those women, offering our worship in response, allowing people to see him in us. Does it matter to our world, does it matter to you that Jesus is risen this Easter?

