

## “Do Tell”

When it comes to resurrection, the Bible is less help than you might think. It is clear enough that the risen, living Christ is the central element of Christian faith. But resurrection itself is nowhere described in detail; so we’re left to assume that we know what we’re talking about when we say we believe in it or we don’t.

The only direct discussion of resurrection comes in I Corinthians 15, in which the Apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that if there is no resurrection our faith is in vain. But then he proceeds to offer the analogy of a seed and to celebrate how different a seed is from the body it produces—for example how different an acorn is from an oak tree. Who could look at the one and imagine the other? Resurrection is like that, he tells us. “What is sown in perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body.”

That is fabulous poetry, in no small part because it leaves us to ponder resurrection as a mystery. If you’re looking for an ironclad description of resurrection, you’ll have to look elsewhere.

With regard to the resurrection of Jesus, what the Bible *does* have to offer are two different kinds of stories: empty tomb stories and appearance stories. Each is wonderful in its own way.

The empty tomb stories are the ones we read on Easter Sunday, and they differ to a surprising degree. Who was the first one at the tomb? Did any of the disciples go? Was there one angel or two? Was there an earthquake? What we have hardly amounts to a clear eyewitness account, even though the message is essentially the same: the tomb is empty.

The appearance stories are far more numerous and even more diverse. Jesus appears to no one (Mark’s version)<sup>1</sup>; or he appears to first to Mary Magdalene and then to the disciples behind closed doors (twice) and then by the seashore in Galilee (John); or he first appears to the women returning

---

<sup>1</sup> As Matt made clear in his wonderful Easter sermon this year, this non-Easter story is so unsatisfactory that two alternative endings were added on to Mark. Check out the footnotes to Mark 16 in your Bible.

from the tomb and subsequently to the disciples on a mountain in Galilee (Matthew).

The details are sometimes even contradictory. Jesus says “touch me” or “don’t touch me”; he eats or he doesn’t, he is recognized or he isn’t. Usually he appears to groups of people, but not because of anything they are doing or expecting. And then, quite often, he disappears immediately and as mysteriously as he came. But always people’s lives are transformed by the presence of the risen Christ. And they are forever shaped by the story they have to tell about the time Jesus Christ appeared to them.

Our lesson for today is from Luke. It follows the much better known story of the Road to Emmaus, in which two followers of Jesus (one is named Cleopas and the other remains unidentified) are walking from Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus, six miles away. As they walk they are talking about recent events: Jesus has just been crucified, but there are rumors of resurrection. As they are talking, Jesus appears and walks along with them, but they do not recognize him. He asks them what they are discussing and they say, “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?” And then they proceed to tell him all about himself. That prospect so intrigues me that I once wrote a musical about this story, called *The Stranger*.

Cleopas and the other pour out their hearts to Jesus: their love and wonder, sadness and disillusionment. And then Jesus, still unknown to them, begins to tell them about all that had been foretold in Moses and the prophets. They are fascinated, and when they arrive at Emmaus they invite the stranger to stay with them and to share a meal. As Jesus breaks the bread and offers a blessing, the eyes of all are opened and they recognize him; but then he vanishes from their sight. In astonishment they say to one another, “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

So they rush back to Jerusalem to tell the disciples; but *they* have their own story to share, about how the risen Christ has appeared to Simon Peter. The two groups compare notes, and both are astounded. But even as they are talking in amazement, the risen Christ appears and stands among them. He really gets around! Remember, this is evening, but it is still Easter Sunday!

“Peace be with you,” Jesus says, as in our lesson from John last week. Despite the fact that both groups have had some experience of the resurrected Jesus, they are startled and terrified, and think they are seeing a

ghost. Jesus first appeals to their senses. They can see and hear him; he invites them to touch him, as well. And then he asks for something to eat, and he devours a piece of broiled fish as a way of demonstrating his corporeality, his physical nature. Luke wants us to understand that Jesus has flesh and bones. He eats. He is not simply a figment of anyone's imagination. These details, as we have seen, vary significantly in the different accounts of post-Easter appearances.

Then, once again, the risen Christ offers a context of understanding for his presence. He reminds them that he had previously taught them that he would suffer, die and rise in accordance with the scriptures, citing Torah, the prophets and the psalms. And then he makes it clear that they are to be witnesses who will call others—not just Jews but people of all nations—summoned to repentance and forgiveness.

The disciples now have their own stories to tell regarding the risen Christ. And they are to understand those stories in light of the greater narrative of God's gracious deeds to all humankind as told in the saga of salvation that is the Bible.

This is how the faith will spread, as followers tell their stories about when Jesus appeared to them.

The Confirmation class is on retreat this weekend. Even as we speak—or as I speak, at any rate—they are writing out and sharing their decisions regarding Confirmation; whether they will take on themselves the responsibility for their own growth in faith. When they were baptized, most of them as infants, other people made promises for them: promises about raising them in the faith and bringing them to the point where they could decide about discipleship for themselves. Through years of Church School and for many of them choirs and for some of them various Stepping Stones activities they have been invited to this time of decision. For two years in Confirmation they have been a part of the same small group of students and adult guides. Together they have worshipped and studied, prayed and played and engaged in service projects. They have learned about the traditions of the faith and shared their lives, their highs and lows, with one another. In various ways that perhaps they are just beginning to understand they have become Christ to one another. And this weekend it all comes to a head for them.

I was privileged to share in retreats like these for more than thirty years. I touched base with Angie on Friday to confirm that the format is still

basically the same, which it is. And I remember vividly when my friend Mike Jackson and I sat down together to plan the first one, in 1973.

The key question we had was whether we could ask these young people to be truly vulnerable to one another—open and honest about their hopes and fears, their faith and doubts. We wondered about establishing a context in which a decision could come from a place deep inside them. On the Saturday night of the retreat we had them do three things.

The first was a strength bombardment—a terrible name for a wonderful activity. In their small groups, these people who have spent so much time together focus in turn on each member of the group. The person who is being bombarded has to remain silent and just receive what the group has to say. And as the focus person sits in silence, the others tell him or her about strengths they have seen. The rules are carefully stated: positive things only. The Thumper principle applies: “If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all.” The focus person is addressed directly, not talked about as though he or she were not present. Eye contact is highly desirable. And people have to tell the truth. Nobody has to say anything. People may speak more than once. When the group is finished, the focus person may say only “Thank you,” and the spotlight passes to the next person.

It is an immensely powerful thing to have people share with you their sincere perceptions of your strengths. The sense of affirmation can be almost overwhelming. But in the context of Confirmation it is even more powerful, because we believe that God calls us to use our gifts in God’s service. The saying is, “Who you are is God’s gift to you; what you make of yourself is your gift to God.” The Confirmands understand not only that God is calling them to lives of loving service, but God has also equipped them with wonderful and unique spiritual gifts.

Following this powerful experience of affirmation, the Confirmands wash one another’s feet. Just as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples on Maundy Thursday, they offer this gift of service to one another. This is a risky thing to do with eighth graders. But it is extraordinarily meaningful.

And then they share in a service of Holy Communion, offering one another the bread and the cup, recalling how Christ offered himself to his followers, and still offers himself to us as he calls us to follow him.

And the thing of it is that it’s amazing how often, when we open our hearts to one another and to Christ in this way, we realize that he is present

among us and within us. And suddenly a lot of things begin to make sense. “Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road?” That’s the way the Emmaus travelers expressed their sudden insight. “Do you mean to tell me that this feeling of love we have found for one another and for the world is the presence of Christ within us and among us?” That’s the way folks are more likely to say it today. And for many, many years—perhaps even for the rest of their lives—they will recall how Christ became real to them, and how they realized then that he had been with them all along.

And then they have their own stories to tell. “You are witness of these things,” Jesus told his followers. We are all witness of these things: lives that are illumined and transformed with a greater depth of meaning and purpose; gifts that are discovered and committed to God’s work; community that is built on a depth of sharing that for the rest of our lives leaves us hungry when we find ourselves settling for less; worship that comes from deep within us when we realize that we are known better than we can ever know ourselves and therefore we are summoned to be our deepest, truest selves.

The risen Christ appears: he becomes real in our hearts and in our living as we learn to tell one another and the world the stories of his presence among us.

To tell you the truth, I don’t really know what resurrection is. But I know that Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed.

Amen

Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ  
4126 Ingersoll Avenue  
Des Moines, Iowa 50312  
(515) 255-3149  
Worship and Church School: 9:00 and 11:00 AM  
Fax: 515-255-8667  
E-mail: [druhe@plymouthchurch.com](mailto:druhe@plymouthchurch.com)