

Do I have to believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead to be Christian?

Questions of Faith and Doubt

Easter Morning 11a.m.

April 1st, 2018

1. The community trusts the story, even if the individual has doubts

Today we celebrate a grand opening:

Even under the cloudy skies

The flowers are out, the music is on, the table is set.

Its not the grand opening of a new business

It is an opening that is on the level of spirituality and faith.

We celebrate

the grand opening of our hearts to strength and joy

the grand opening of our minds to that which mind can not fathom,

the grand opening of our senses to the taste of freedom

the grand opening of our souls to hope,

The story of Easter calls us to step into it: Into the empty tomb, into the graveyard where Mary Magdalene meets the Risen One, onto the road, where two disillusioned people meet Jesus and learn from him as he appears in in his risen form.

We are people in community. Individuals do doubt, but the community trusts the story. Carries it forward. The community trusts the story and the God of whom the story bears witness.

This is how I might tell the story to someone who does not know it:

There once was a man who gave his whole energy to those who were left out and sick and poor. He loved so much and taught so sensibly, that some called him the Saviour, the One we waited for: the Messiah. He healed and made people feel whole, and in doing so he re-connected them with God's love. He was among people humbly and concretely, without show and fuss, but with the authority of One who knows what he is doing and what he is talking about. He acted in such a way that where he was, everyone felt God very

close.

For some among his people that was news of great joy. For others, that was a threat to the smooth functioning of their religious and political institutions who had done very well without him. During a last meal he had with his friends, he spoke of his impending death and that this death would lead to life.

And then, he was brutally murdered and buried, betrayed by the powerful from within his own people and executed by the occupying military forces in his land.

So, the way of the world; we thought. So, another good man gone; we thought.

And then came that strange morning: At the break of dawn the stone rolled away from the entrance of the rock tomb by who knows whom. Then the sight that disturbs everything and everyone. The body gone. Then the sound that is unbelievable:

A message about this One standing again, being alive and going ahead for his friends. Go home, the message said. He will meet you where you are home and where it all began.

If that is true, his friends realized, then he would be everything they had thought he might be. Then he would be someone who is right next to God, indeed. But- is it true? How could it ?

Confusion and fear was first. And scepticism. And it lasted. The fear and the scepticism and the confusion about who had seen him when and where.. Let us never forget that. Their confusion and fear lasted hours., days., weeks. Lasted until they met him. Not re-animated to normal life only to die again in ripe old age. Not as one may meet the Ghost of a deceased person. They met someone who was at times easily recognizable as Jesus, and at other times looked like a stranger. At times experienced so real he would eat with them, and other times coming and going through locked doors without trace. Alive somehow but not in any way anyone had ever seen or experienced before. They were met by Jesus risen, not once, but several times in different circumstances. Confusion and fear lasted until they felt the peace he breathed into them.

Mark 15:1-8

And then, as no other explanation emerges, they, who are so much like us, begin to trust the words about his Rising., Those who value and love him

realize over the hours, days and weeks that he is appearing among them and calling them into a life without fear and with total purpose., They realize (what could well be the most profound statement about this One: and written down in John's gospel:.) "I am the Resurrection and The Life - the one believing toward me even if he should die, he will live" (John 11:25-26) They come to believe that if they continue to follow him now, they will be bound together with him in his actions of healing and teaching, his suffering, his Eternal Life.

But that realization takes time. Not all come to believe at the same time. Some who did not value him during his life time strangely do come to believe in him also, such as his younger brother, James.

2. What is the meaning of this story?

If this is true, then, what these early witnesses saw and heard, then, what we are celebrating here is not an eternal cycle of rebirth after death, nor a sense that the message of Jesus is still relevant and lives on, but we celebrate a moment in history when, to borrow a phrase from catholic writer Ronald Knox, "the wall" that keeps us from seeing into what lies beyond "turns into a window".

Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury suggests that Easter is: "A moment when we see through to the ultimate energy behind and within all things."

Never do we see anything quite like that normally- the only remote parallel I can imagine is what it must be like for those who have a near death experience of unimaginable peace, and then live from that sense for the rest of their lives, without fear of death.

But many of us have understandable difficulties. How could a window into a different reality open for some like this, and not for all?

3. The Thomas' story shows both the validity of doubt and the hope that we will move beyond it:

Someone stated recently: I can't believe in a bodily resurrection of Jesus. Am I still a Christian?

Thomas expresses the heart of our difficulties.

John 20:24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus[a]), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

Unless...I have proof, he says, a personal encounter that convinces me, I am not going to believe.

They all knew what happens to a dead body. Scientifically, the gospel news is impossible. They did not have our level of science but they had life experience. They were not naive. They had critical faculties.

So why would Thomas trust someone else on such an outrageous claim?

Carl Sagan made popular the phrase: "an extraordinary claim requires extraordinary evidence" that is the core of the scientific approach.

Who does not sympathize with Thomas here this morning! Good for him, I want to say.

In fact, no one in the story criticizes him for his doubt. The question is: Will he have that extraordinary evidence? He hangs around. He stays with the community.

And after a while he does receive that gift. A week later, still confused, still in fear, for they might be rounded up and crucified as followers of this Galilean rebel next---

and Jesus comes through doors locked because of fear. And honours Thomas' doubt. "Come here," he says. "There you go. Put your hands in my wounds. See for yourself. "

Wow.

Would you still love to trade places with Thomas?! Or would you be scared about the implications for your life?

What courage it would take to really live according to this altered reality, in our world?!

...Unafraid; willing to risk life ...living as if death had not the last word, living full of daring hope and reckless generous kindness, even love...

And how hard it is...for us. The first and second generation Christians had a fire and a passion we seldom match.

Rarely, rarely do people have encounters that take all doubt away. That was a very unusual moment of grace that happened to Thomas. Paul, the passionate opponent of the early Christian church had another such encounter with the Risen one, less hands on than Thomas', but concrete and earthy enough to turn his life around.

Most of us live with our doubts without touching and seeing. I welcome doubt as part of a faith that is real and honest. Anyone can sign a credal statement; anyone can say- o yes, of course I believe in the resurrection of the body. But to trust Jesus Christ with your life, here on earth, that's when it gets hard. This probably why gospel writer John added: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe". That's us.

However, we don't have to sort out all our theology before we decide to walk the Christian way of spirituality. We step forward and say- I'll be one of them who believe in the resurrection of Jesus. I'll walk in his way of hope - at least I'll try.

This is why the United Church of Canada did not discipline our past moderator Bill Phipps, when he, in an unfortunate interview with the Ottawa Citizen, stated that he did not believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus. It sure caused a fuss though. There was no lack of Christians and non Christians who judged him severely. I did not judge him. I admit I did think: he could have spoken a bit wiser as moderator perhaps he might have said...: "Our creeds in the United Church state this. We trust our witnesses in the New Testament. I myself have not been able to verify this in my life...." perhaps. But I did not judge him. Too much I respect him, because he reminds me of the apostle Peter, the man of action who made blunders quite often...yet who was a courageous mover and shaker and faithful disciple, and Bill Phipps that's his style, too.

How can you truly believe in such a thing unless you have experienced that Christ is alive? And that, by grace?

Faith in Jesus as the Risen One, Faith God, as shown in Jesus, is not

something we can produce by ourselves.

“Faith is God’s work in us, that changes us and gives new birth from God.. It... makes us completely different people. It changes our hearts, our spirits, our thoughts and all our powers. It brings the Holy Spirit with it. Yes, it is a living, creative, active and powerful thing, this faith. “ (Martin Luther, in the introduction to the his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans)

4. Be at peace with your doubts:

So we need to be at peace with our doubts. They are part of the journey. No one knew that better than the famous church reformer Martin Luther.

Doubts keep us humble and human.

Thomas' story shows how doubts can lead us to a deeper faith, when we honour our doubts and pursue an answer. I think that when we ask deep questions it means we are ready for the next level of faith.

Thomas' response after this unbelievable experience is incredibly deep and is not, as far as I know matched by any other disciple in the gospel stories: his response is: “My Lord and my God!”

You don't have to believe. You do not need to sign a credal statement as entrance ticket into discipleship or friendship with Jesus either. It is enough that you seek him, that you love his way, that you try your best to follow him. Then you are in relationship with him, and the rest is up to God. You may find that over the course of your life your beliefs change. Hopefully, your appreciation of Jesus deepens.

In closing I would like to borrow words from Californian pastor/theologian Bruce Epperly

“Resurrection will always be a mystery. But, we know it when it happens. Resurrection is too much to comprehend when we assume the finalities of death and defeat. But, the empty tomb portends an open future in which the Risen One goes ahead us as companion, guide, and inspiration. While I don’t worry about the mechanics of the resurrection, I believe that Jesus lives ... I believe that Christ is alive and in his resurrection, we can face the future with strength, courage, and wisdom as we take our place as God’s partners in healing the earth.”

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