

Asking Better Questions (Read John 20:1-18)
Pinegrove UC, Easter morning 2014
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I still remember this argument I got myself into a long time ago. It was with a friend whom I thought was terribly sloppy with his faith (you'll have to cut me some slack here, I was maybe twenty and pretty cocky). The argument was about nothing less than Jesus' resurrection. "It doesn't matter if Jesus rose from the grave", my friend told me. "What's important is justice, peace, and love. And all those things are true, even if Jesus never literally rose from the grave."

"The resurrection *does* matter", I insisted. "It matters a lot. Don't kid yourself. If you don't believe in the physical resurrection of the crucified Jesus, you simply cannot call yourself a Christian". And I would go out of my way to prove that Jesus actually, really and physically was raised from the dead. I had my arguments all neatly lined up, and I knew I was right.

I would quote from Paul, like his 1st letter to the Corinthians, where he says, "If Christ is not raised, your faith is futile". I would remind my friend of the apostle Peter's speech in Acts 2. The resurrection mattered to them.

Is our vision so much clearer than theirs from a distance of almost 2000 years after the actual event? The tomb was empty, and Jesus had a resurrection body. This was their conviction, and it went against every historically verifiable fibre of their culture. They didn't expect it, I would point out. Dead is dead, and (to quote the Munchkins) Jesus was "positively, absolutely, undeniably and reliably dead". They had no reason to expect him to come back to life again, so how could they ever have imagined it?

In spite of their expectations, something happened that so mystified them, they couldn't even come up with a coherent narrative to explain it. The first witness on the scene was - a woman? In that culture you might as well have relied on the testimony of a twelve-year old. Something had happened, I argued; something so unexpected, so compelling, that it started a powerful movement that has changed the lives of millions of people, and still does. So yes, I said, Jesus' physical resurrection matters.

And after all that I would lean back and rest my case. I honestly thought I would be able to change my friend's mind by crushing him with logical arguments. Turns out, you cannot argue someone into faith. I confused being self-righteous with being faithful. It was a small miracle that this friend stuck it out with me for so long...

It took me a number of years and a few more patient friends for me to realize that even the apostle Peter (a.k.a. "the Rock", no less) did not believe, even after seeing the empty tomb with his very own eyes. And Thomas, another disciple, didn't believe either, even after hearing the story from direct eyewitnesses who were also his closest friends. Apparently, the empty tomb -even if you could prove it- proves nothing. And apparently, hearing the story from direct and reliable witnesses doesn't do it, either.

Now let's do a little thought experiment here. Suppose I really ticked off Prime Minister Harper somehow, and they decided to publicly execute me (I know, but bear with me). And after the execution you go to the cemetery to pay your last respects or dance on my grave, whichever you prefer. But when you get there, all you see is a hole in the ground and at the bottom of it an empty coffin with the lid off. Your first thought would be "Hallelujah! Hubert is the risen son of God!", right? Of course not; your first thought is, "Who the bleep took the body?!"

And suppose you went back to the church looking for answers, and on the front step you found a frightened twelve-year old kid. And the kid stammers, "I saw Pastor Hubert! He's alive! At first I thought it was somebody else, but then he said my name - and it was him!" Your first thoughts would be, "I knew it! I always suspected Hubert was the second person of the Trinity. I just knew death couldn't keep him down!" Right? Of course not! Your first thought is, "Right; this kid's seeing dead people... The parents better invest in some serious therapy for him".

The empty tomb proves *nothing*. Hearing the story is *not* enough. Because it's not what faith is about. What faith is about is being transformed by experiencing the risen Christ.

You know why Mary was the first witness in John's version of the Easter story? Because she was the only one who stayed at the empty tomb. As soon as the men saw the body was gone they ran off in a panic. But she stayed. She cried. She prayed. She searched. She asked. And she learned news she never dreamed she would, she experienced something she could barely comprehend. And it shook her to the core.

Ironically, it now seems that after all those years I was right after all - but for the wrong reason. Yes, the resurrection *does* matter. Only the question is not "Did the resurrection really, actually happen?" No. A much better question would be, "If the risen Christ is calling us, how then shall we live?"

It's a question we'll never fully find the answer to. But by asking it we may learn something we never dreamed of; we may experience something we can barely comprehend. And it will shake us to our core.

We may come to understand that faith is not about certainties, but about asking better questions. We may come to understand that even though there is darkness and suffering in the world, evil and misery do not have the last word. The holiest week of the year may begin in doubt and confusion, but it ends in hope. A transforming, life-giving, core-shaking hope.

I hope that over the course of this past Holy Week you have been able to experience its power with others. I pray it may open your ears and your heart to the resurrection story's deeper meaning. That you experience the living Christ and his message that God loves us as we are, no strings attached; that God's "YES" is so much bigger than our "no"; that even death itself cannot separate us from the love of God as shown in Jesus Christ.

Because we are loved, we can love others as we love ourselves. Once we have experienced that, life will never again be "business as usual". You may notice unusual shifts and changes within you and the people around you. Not necessarily easy or comfortable changes, though; sometimes they can feel like the cramps and pangs that come with growing pains. For grow we must.

But with every little (or large) act of selfless love we do in Christ's name, we move a bit further away from darkness into light.

With every act of selfless love in Christ's' name, God's reign of peace and justice becomes a bit more of a reality, right here on earth as it is in heaven.

And with every act of selfless love in his name, Christ is risen in us - again, and again.

May it be so. Amen.