

I Believe In The Resurrection

Texts: John 11:38-44; I Cor. 15:19-26

4/4/10

I

What Is Easter?

Three stupid guys just died and are at the pearly gates of heaven. St. Peter tells them that they can enter the gates if they can answer one simple question.

St. Peter asks the first man, "WHAT IS EASTER?" The man replies, "Oh, that's easy, it's the holiday in November when everybody gets together, eats turkey, and is thankful..."

"WRONG," replies St. Peter, and proceeds to ask the second man the same question, "WHAT IS EASTER?"

The second man replies, "No, Easter is the holiday in December when we put up a nice tree, exchange presents, and celebrate the birth of Jesus."

St. Peter looks at the second man, shakes his head in disgust, looks at the third man and asks, "WHAT IS EASTER?"

The third man smiles and looks St. Pete in the eye.

"I know what Easter is. Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating at the last supper and He was later deceived and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took Him to be crucified and was stabbed in the side, made Him wear a crown of thorns, and He was hung on a cross. He was buried in a nearby cave which was sealed off by a large boulder. Every year the boulder is moved aside so that Jesus can come out, and if He sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter."

What are we looking for at Easter? The average Easter basket contains a clue. Pack together fake green grass, chocolate bunnies, marshmallow chicks, Cadbury eggs – and what you've got (besides a sugar buzz) is a celebration of life.

Is that what Easter proclaims – life is a beautiful day with no sunset? An eternal reality as breathtaking and totally expected as the azaleas at Augusta on Master's Monday?

Perhaps the resurrection of Jesus is just the Christian way of saying what the Easter basket says. Life doesn't so much end as it simply finds a way to begin again.

II

It may be hard to believe but there were some early Christians who had problems with Easter. To be sure they believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. When the stone was rolled away from the tomb they were absolutely confident there was “no body” there.

It was their resurrection they weren't too sure about. The Corinthians to whom the Apostle Paul is writing in our text didn't see the connection between what happened to Jesus on that first Easter and what would happen to them.

For a lot of cultural reasons, they didn't like, and didn't believe the notion that people like them would rise bodily from the dead. You might say instead of believing in the resurrection of the body they had settled on the “almost Easter” faith of immortality of the soul. Wasn't it enough to believe that life really never ends?

Is it? There was a recent Harris religion poll that said 70% of Americans believe in the resurrection of Jesus (by the way that's down 10% since 2003). But a Time/CNN poll taken a decade ago said that only 26% of Americans think that they'll have bodies in eternity; that the resurrection is for them.

It seems that there is still plenty of “almost Easter” faith around. Like those ancient Corinthians plenty of us have trouble drawing a line between what happened to Jesus and what will happen to us. Bodies for eternity? Is that really necessary? Most folks seem to be more comfortable with a soul that lives forever.

The “almost Easter” faith seems a little easier to swallow.

III

It's fair to ask though whether a comfortable “almost Easter” faith is up to the job of making sense of life. When Martha stood outside the tomb of her brother Lazarus, with her friend Jesus, the notion that “life never ends” seemed to be far from her.

When Jesus says to move the stone away from Lazarus tomb, Martha's response says it all. *“But Lord, by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there for four days.”*

Lazarus is dead. Dead is dead. And a man as bright as Jesus should know better. And in the face of life's greatest challenge Jesus issues one of his own. *"Did I not tell you if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"*

Believe what? We have to go back in the story a few verses to find it. Jesus says to Martha in verse 25:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

I am the resurrection.

Easter is not a festival to remember the immortality of the disembodied soul. It is an opportunity to opt in to what God is doing to Christ and through Christ – the resurrection of the body! It is challenge to see your life and your eternity from an entirely different point of view.

So Jesus looks into the tomb and says *"Lazarus, come out."* And we have just been given a teaser of the glory of God. Lazarus is not truly "resurrected" – he will die again. But his rising by the power of Christ is a picture of what awaits Christ and awaits us.

Paul the Apostle writes:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Cor. 15:20)

He's saying that Jesus is just the first part of God's worldwide harvest that marks the beginning of eternity. And when Jesus returns, God will finish what God started as we too join him in a resurrected life.

The Christian hope, the Easter hope, is not that at death we will spend eternity like a bunch of balloons that have floated up against the ceiling of heaven. It is that in God's time our souls and our bodies will again be joined, and both will be changed so we can live out God's purposes for us and for the world.

IV

What happens to people who surrender the “almost Easter” faith of the immortality of the soul for the Easter faith of the resurrection of the body? What happens when we answer “yes” to Jesus’ question of do you believe this?

We’ve just quit trying to save ourselves. To say Christ is the resurrection and the life is to confess that there is nothing in me that is. I am not eternal. I look to God to secure a future for me that I cannot secure for myself. And I will have a different quality of life because of it.

It means that bodies matter. We were created to know, love, and serve the Lord from head to toe. So our bodies are to be concrete expressions of what our souls believe. It is this body, imperfect and unbelieving as it may be at times, where God happens in this life and in the life to come.

Other people’s bodies matter too. To believe in the resurrection of the body is to believe that it matters to God how we feed, clothe, and care for our neighbors. And any version of the Christian faith that teaches that God is only interested in the condition of our neighbor’s soul, and not their flesh, mocks the hope of the resurrection. Those who we rub shoulders with in this life may well be the people we’ll be rubbing shoulders with in the next one.

And finally to believe the resurrection is to have every reason to believe that we’ll be able love the people in the next life that we’ve loved in this one. When it comes to people I’ve never loved an abstraction. They’ve always come with finger and toes, personalities and peculiarities, handshakes and hugs. Is too much to hope that we will be able to see them, know them, and touch them, in the age to come?

Why settle for an “almost Easter” faith in eternity, when Christ offers us an “Easter” faith in himself? *I am the resurrection...Do you believe this?*

V

A family was watching a movie on the life of Jesus on television. Their six-year-old daughter was deeply moved as the moviemaker realistically portrayed Jesus' crucifixion and death. Tears ran down the girl's face as they took him from the cross and lay him in a borrowed tomb. She watched as a guard was placed outside the tomb. And then suddenly a big smile broke on her face. She bounced up on the arm of the chair and said with great anticipation, "Now comes the good part!"

Today we are here to celebrate the good part. Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. It was good for Jesus; it is and will be good for us. Do you believe this?