

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Matthew 28:1-10

“Showing the Way”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
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Easter Day

The one thing the different New Testament writers agree on is that the tomb was empty, and Jesus Christ had risen. That’s important, because they don’t agree on a lot else, when it comes to the details. This morning we read Matthew’s version of events, which differs from John’s, which differs from Luke’s, and Paul has his own way of telling it. So I have to think the details matter less than this – the tomb was empty, and Christ was risen! That has been central to the church ever since, so that we come back to that empty tomb regularly, in our liturgy, when we say “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.”

And yet, the empty tomb itself is not proof of resurrection. The two women named Mary went to the tomb at dawn; they were the same ones sitting across from it on Friday. Probably they were there to keep away grave-robbers. Grave-robbing was a common practice – stealing the wrapping cloths, even the costly spices that anointed a body. And Jesus was buried in Joseph Arimathea’s tomb – a likely target, since Joseph was well-to-do. That’s why a heavy stone was rolled across the opening. It kept out the lazier thieves. Even so, in time to come that is what many would say – his followers took the body and hid it.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote that: “Anyway you look at it, that is a mighty fragile beginning for a religion that has lasted ... 2,000 years now, and yet that is where so many of us continue to focus our energy, on that tomb, on that morning, on what did or did not happen there and how to explain it to anyone who does not happen to believe it too...”¹

There are some things the church has done with Easter that bother me, and things that I find unhelpful. Maybe these questions will be useful to you as well.

I want to resist the view that the resurrection was a done deal from the start. One of the things that Matthew the Gospel-writer does, writing as an already-Christian evangelist, and telling the story years later, is read *back* into the story what he now knows from the vantage point of faith. In the previous chapter Matthew recounts the Chief priests wanting a guard posted on the tomb because Jesus said “In three days I will rise again.” And we might wonder if Jesus really said such a thing, because it seems at odds with the crucified Christ who cried from the cross: “My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?”

The forsaken one seems so much more likely. What I want to resist is the implication that Jesus’ resurrection was so automatic. If it was a given, what keeps us from being nonchalant about it: “Well sure, he rose from death – after all he was divine, how could he not? Did you ever think otherwise?” If we take the resurrection so for granted it diminishes, even negates, his sacrifice. It makes the cross irrelevant, and doesn’t take death seriously. But if he didn’t know, if it was not automatic, then his courage and his passion are all the more real.

This was not something Jesus did for himself. God did it! God raised Jesus. The empty tomb alone is not proof of resurrection, but rather a sign; it is God's statement, through the crucified and Risen Christ, of how things are going to be. Maybe what happens after – the next day, and the next, is even more important.

I want to resist a mechanistic view of Easter. All of the theories of atonement which the church has developed over many centuries seem to me to fall short. "Jesus died for my sins," we say, and then move on as if we had said much, or as if there were anywhere to go from there. Such a mechanistic view of the work of Christ seems to make of God a miserly bean-counter, tracking how much we owe and whether the invoice is paid. That's not the God I know and love.

I want to resist the view that the only point of the resurrection was so that we would believe. Especially if we think that the usefulness of "believing" is so that we will go to heaven. How do we believe in the Risen Christ? Did we just decide to do so... flip a switch in the brain... is it an act of the will? We are a sophisticated, educated, even jaded culture. How do you convince someone of the resurrection anyway, and why do it? Quoting the Bible won't help the skeptic. Myself, I have always been more motivated by poetry than by intellectual assent to a proposition!

I want to resist the notion that the Christian faith is all summed up in Christmas and Easter, the big celebrations, and the rest is just downtime. If that is all someone could see – someone looking among us for meaning and purpose, would they wonder if the church is just about the party? Could that person imagine a Christian community that is there in *non-festive* times of pain and confusion? I hope so.

Having said that – those things which I resist – here is where I am following this text. The two Mary's went to the tomb, surreal things happen and the stone was rolled away by an angel of the Lord, who disabled the guards and said: "Do not be afraid: I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here... he has been raised...go tell the disciples he is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there." Suddenly they encountered Jesus who said the same: "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and I'll see them there."

Craig Barnes, who was at National Presbyterian in Washington, said "*What the Gospels ask is not "Do you believe?" but 'Have you encountered a risen Christ?'*"

It is not the empty tomb *itself* that matters, but rather if this grave is empty, then where is the body of Christ? Where shall we look for Jesus?

How about Galilee? Jesus himself (echoing the angel) told the women and the other disciples – "Don't be afraid; I'm going to Galilee; I'll see you there." There's no record in the New Testament of this trip happening, 60 miles from Jerusalem. But Galilee *was* where the whole thing began. It was where Jesus was from in Nazareth, it was where the disciples were from. A friend sent me an email this week reminding me that Jesus

withdrew to Galilee in Chapter 4, after the temptations and John's arrest, and asked was he going "home?" Something new and big was about to happen, and it wasn't going to start in Jerusalem; it was going to start at home.

S.J. Patterson wrote: "(Jesus') words and deeds mean little to us, if anything at all. We do not look to Jesus for a way of life, but for salvation. 'He died that we might live.'" ²

I believe Jesus' words and deeds have to mean nearly everything to us. If we are to live with meaning and purpose, to live with depth and power, we will have to live a life after His. It will not be enough to have a celebration for a dead and vanished hero. It will not be enough to give intellectual assent to a proposition. It will not be enough to think that a glibly-received salvation will do, and think that it will mean anything on Monday morning.

If we would live with depth and power we will want to care about the things our Risen Lord cared about and do the things that he did. If we would be disciples we will need to work for the salvation of the world, the raising of the poor, the binding up of the broken ones. If we would follow the Risen Christ we may be called to oppose the kingdoms of death and the kingdoms of this world, and we may be called to risk much...or all. What the Gospels ask is not "Do you believe?" but 'Have you encountered a risen Christ?

And where will we find that Risen Christ? Galilee, he said. In the usual place, the home place. Where ordinary dramas of human life are played out. Where we fight and love and live, and look for signs God is among us. Where hard decisions are made, and most things are ambiguous, and tears are shed and laughter is shared, where we experience both great heart-ache and great tenderness, where memories are made, and where we share in common life and have adventures together.

Where is that Body of Christ, the one that isn't in the tomb where it was supposed to be? Here at the Lord's Table, where we re-enact both his death and his life.

Resurrection life may be less about us going to heaven than about heaven coming here. Jesus showed us the way to live. Life can still be hard, and we can even die, and we *do* die. But Christ Jesus turned death into life, turned even the valley of the shadow of death into a Galilee – a home and a usual place. He has gone ahead of us, found the way through death, and made that way safe. Christ showed us the way to die; but more importantly, showed us the way to live.

The Lord is Risen indeed!

¹ Taylor, Barbara Brown, *Christian Century*, 1998

² Patterson, S.J. Killing Jesus, in The Future of the Christian Tradition, Polebridge Press, Santa Rosa, CA, 2007