

Can You Believe It?
Rev. Curtis Webster
Westminster Presbyterian Church - Ontario, CA
April 12, 2020 - Year A - Easter Sunday
Matthew 28:1-10

We just heard Matthew's breath-taking account of the first Easter morning and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. All four Gospels tell of the Resurrection and, while there may be some differences about the details, they all agree on one extremely important fact: Jesus, Who had been crucified, dead and buried, rose on the third day after crucifixion and appeared to human witnesses. He was not an apparition or a ghost or some facsimile of Jesus that God created for the occasion. It was Jesus. He had been dead and now He was alive again. No question about it. No doubts to be resolved. No committees needed to be formed to investigate and report back. Jesus lived again.

Even so, resistance to the reality of Jesus' resurrection began immediately, literally on the day that He rose. We know from Matthew that a story was planted by the chief priests that the disciples had stolen Jesus' body from the tomb and were promoting the Resurrection as a cruel hoax. Before the sun went down on that first Easter Sunday, denial of the reality of the Resurrection was already spreading throughout Jerusalem.

We can rightly condemn the chief priests for their treachery but this story does illustrate a major challenge that the Resurrection has always presented for Christians attempting to spread the Gospel to non-Christians. Telling someone who has had no exposure to the Bible or any of our Christian traditions that a man who was certifiably and incontrovertibly deceased sat up and walked away is an exercise that at first is likely to fall on deaf ears.

The chief priests invented a fiction but it was a fiction that many, if not most, chose to

believe. Why? Because it makes far more sense at first glance than the truth of Jesus' Resurrection. If you're not a disciple and you've had no personal connection to the Jesus movement, that's the version that you're likely to accept.

Our Christian faith is founded upon a belief in an event that has had no parallel in recorded history and which seems to contradict everything we know about the human body, about the inevitability of death.

It was an outrageous story two thousand years ago. It is an outrageous story today. It is a story whose credibility hangs on the witness of a handful of uneducated Judean peasants.

And yet, we believe in the reality of the Resurrection. We do not believe that the Resurrection was a metaphor or a poetic re-imagining of the fate of a man who made a failed attempt to claim that he was the Messiah. We don't believe it to be a theory or a good guess as to what happened. We believe it as an established fact.

Why do we believe that the Resurrection happened?

Well, the Bible says it happened. Which we accept as being pretty definitive. But let's go back to the nonbeliever, the person who has no grounding in the church and no reason (yet) to accept the testimony of Scripture. They're probably going to want more. They are going to want to know something beyond the words themselves. They're going to want to hear it from our hearts not so much from our heads.

Here's my answer. We believe this outlandish story because, on a deep level, it actually makes a whole lot of sense. We are all meant to live on after death. We can feel at the very core of our being that life on this plane of existence is not the whole story. There is something beyond life and death. And yet there is this thing we call "sin" that gets in the way. God needed to

remove that barrier. God needed not only to remove the barrier but to give us living proof of the reality of salvation.

The testimony of Scripture is indeed important, very important. But the real clincher is the work of the Spirit reaching out to souls. Each soul is a separate, wonderful entity. And each soul is connected to all other souls. In spreading the message of the Gospel, I can't give you a magic formula, eloquent words that are guaranteed to penetrate the hardest of shells. I can't give it to you because it doesn't exist. But, if you are fully connected to that deepest part of your soul, you'll know exactly what to say. There is no testimony more powerful than your own unique experience of faith. Tell it in your own words. Tell it from your own heart and your own soul. Live the Easter story. Be the Easter story.

Friends, on this most glorious day on the Christian calendar, celebrate the living reality of the Resurrection. Breathe it in deeply. Let it envelop you, mind, body and soul. Your sins have been cleansed. Your soul has been redeemed. And, in God's eyes, your journey has barely begun.