

## THE REAL THING

Though many of you rejoice and delight in the images usually associated with Easter, I have never been particularly interested in them. I do know that “Easter” is the Saxon goddess of the East (*Eostre* or *Ostara*), whose festival was held in the Spring, and that April was called *Ostermonath*, the month of the Ost-end wind, the wind from the East. Surely Spring is beautiful, the flowers are lovely, the birds sing wonderfully, and some of you get very turned on by it all. I have no desire to weaken your appreciation of Mother Nature, or to suggest that it is not connected with your awareness of and appreciation for the Creator. I simply confess that I don’t have much interest in the trappings of Easter. I prefer Autumn. Springtime and the flowers don’t talk to me like they do to most of you.

I am not, however, as narrow-minded as some of you suspect. I’m the one who encouraged us to have an Easter-egg hunt here at our church for the children each year, even though I know it’s an old Persian custom – a Zoroastrian practice to give a *Pasch egg* to each other as a symbol of creation, and as a reminder that Ormuzd (*Ahura Mazda*, The Wise Lord) and Ahriman (*Angra Mainyu*, The Spiritual Foe) are still fighting over the egg of creation, and that you’d better side with Ormuzd unless you want Ahriman to win and bring everything to the depths of darkness and evil.

But personally, I am not very interested in Easter eggs either, or in Easter bunnies, though I’m one of the few people who knows why they hide the eggs. On the other hand, I am endlessly interested, fascinated, and enthralled with the Resurrection of Jesus. It is increasingly difficult for me to understand how anyone can endure this life without knowing the Resurrection. It is hard for me to fathom how anyone goes to work in the morning, comes home at night, or pursues any interest or activity in any area of life ... without knowing the Resurrection. I cannot comprehend how anyone can *truly* love their children or their mate, cherish their friends, or team up with colleagues ... unless they know the Resurrection.

If I looked into the eyes of my son or daughter or wife, or any of you, and thought, “It is all soon over ...” – well, there are days when I might like to hang on to that thought for just a fleeting moment, but

that's only the inner imp, who sometimes likes to highlight the real truth when I start to forget. It reminds me of how silly all life would seem if this brief physical veneer was all there was. Seeing that we are in training for the long haul, I am even more grateful for the way you put up with me. And you: Do you think I would preach or teach the way I do - or put up with you the way I do - if I thought we were only here for a few more years and then poof? Even those of you who get furious with me: Would I care one way or the other, if I believed this church was only a meaningless little neighborhood social club and did not have a destiny beyond all that we see - and each of us a rendezvous with our Lord in a higher realm?

So my point is not new or brilliant, but it is important: If you want to talk about the bunnies and the flowers and the birds and the bees, that's good, that's nice, but that's not the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. A lot of folk today get sidetracked by fluff and feathers and fur and petals, but the temporary delights of Spring are nowhere near the power of the Resurrection. We use the symbols of things we can touch and see to point toward higher things. That is, themes of freedom, release, and new birth connect in lovely ways with Spring itself, and break forth in our hearts like Spring itself. And that *is* lovely. But frequently I have had the experience of talking to somebody in June or October, when the fluff and feathers have blown away, and they need the Resurrection, only nobody ever told it straight enough for them to be able to claim it, or hang on to it. But as you all know by now, I will tell it as straight as I understand it. That doesn't make me right, but I have always been as straight and honest with you about our faith as I know how to be. The Rites of Spring are lovely, but we still have reason to stay aware, and to not get so focused on the symbols that we forget what they point toward - and that they point *far beyond* themselves.

And so ... it's Easter! And so, I will make a proclamation: I do proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that you are loved by the God Of All Creation. And that the Christ, who put His life on the line for you, has shown you how much and how deep that love is. Especially I proclaim to you, in the name of Jesus the Christ, that if you do not yet believe in Him, yet He believes in you. If you do not yet know God, yet God knows and loves you. If you come here with whatever level or dimension of doubt, still you are welcome here. And though you may not believe it yet, God wants you in eternal life, and it is the power and love of God that will keep offering it to you - no matter what you think, and no matter how much or how little you deserve it.

I know that you have and will run into many teachers and preachers who tell you differently, who put all kinds of threats and restrictions on this Gospel. And yes, they tell me that I'm going to Hell too, because they say I don't believe it properly either. But that's okay, I don't believe them. I believe in Jesus, who came to those who did not believe it properly, and made a WAY for us too. So don't trust anyone who tries to lock the message back up into their tiny frames of whom God loves, and on which conditions of behavior or belief. What we believe does free us to participate and cooperate more consciously. But what we believe does *not* change the heart of God. Jesus' coming here - His teaching and healing and life here - proclaims God's love for us. The Cross and the Resurrection are about *how much* God loves us. That does not go away because of anything we do or don't do, or anything we believe or don't believe.

So we try to trust God's love. If we get confused or perplexed by the words or the systems, or even by the way somebody uses the Bible, we keep remembering that Jesus came; how He died; that witnesses for two thousand years claim they know His living presence. If words get confusing, we watch the actions of God - especially with Jesus - and we include what we ourselves experience in our own lives.

The Cross, by the way - imperative and essential to our awakening, our repentance, our becoming aware of our true condition and peril - the Cross *by itself* cannot reconcile us to God. The Cross by itself would leave us broken, hopeless, despairing. It is the Cross *followed by the Resurrection* that lights our lives, transforms us, calls us onto the Path and WAY of our Lord. After the Cross and Resurrection, the old life - as we perceived it and tried to live it - is ludicrous, and meaningless. After the Cross and Resurrection, we feel an urgent desire to bring everybody we care about across the chasm from the old life into the New Life - the LIFE so full of promise and joy and challenge and hope.

And do I even need to mention it among you? I hope not, but I will anyway: Some people want to go straight to the Resurrection and skip the Cross. They go for the "good stuff" - never mind where it comes from or how you get there; never mind character, repentance, growth, genuine conversion; never mind what we are really like, or what we are called to become. Just skip straight to Heaven, and be the same old people there that we are here. But for those of you who have not come to Easter from Good Friday: you cannot get to the Resurrection except by way of

the Cross. (Lots of New Age groups try to pretend you can, and certainly you are welcome to try them if you like. But so-called “New Age” religion is really a tired old gnosticism that went bankrupt in the second century A.D. and that people keep trying to bring back because the Way of the Cross is so hard. Well, at least we can all have sympathy for that ... )

But today, like every Sunday, we are here to celebrate the Resurrection. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the core truth of all hope and light and love in this life. And it also connects us to the hope and light and love of the LIFE to come. A second sidetrack from the Resurrection of Jesus Christ (far more serious than flowers and bunnies) comes from what seems at first to be a mere problem of semantics. There is no one alive on earth today who believes in the Resurrection of Jesus more than I do. But I am offended by the term “physical resurrection” because it doesn’t match the Scriptures, and it reduces the most dramatic event in the history of the world to something so small, and so locked-back in time, that people can believe it without letting it make any difference in their lives whatsoever. There are people across the land, thousands of them, who firmly believe that Jesus rose from the dead, yet they live with no theme of resurrection playing in their own lives. Their hope is in Heaven. Well, so is mine, but if we are as dead to the transforming power of Christ *after believing in the Resurrection* as we were before we believed it, *something* has to be missing. The Gospel of God’s love has somehow been changed over the years into the weakened message that “Jesus came to save us ... later.” Well, then, let’s gather together to become the church later. And we can repent later, and give our lives to Christ later, and find the true joy of new relationships, redeemed labor, and Godly families LATER. Meanwhile, on with the same old life, in the same old way. And that is exactly what has happened to the Christian church far too much of the time, in far too many places. Only a handful of the church’s people are actually being redeemed by the Redeemer, because we won’t pay attention to what Jesus Christ is about *in the here and now*. We’re too busy with other important things *now*, because we think Jesus is about *later*.

Well, since I’m not in charge (thank God), I know that the Holy Spirit has sent some of you here today because you are finally and truly tired of the old life, and are eager for a new one. You will be able to track it with me if you try - track it through to the real thing. We are going on past the physical resurrection - the one so many people claim happened so long ago, the one that is always about *later* - on to the real power of

the Resurrected One, the ONE who comes into this world to take us from here to eternity. First, let's turn to the Scriptures, just so you know I'm not messing up or reducing or reinventing the message.

*So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual.... Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers and sisters: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (I Corinthians 15:42-50)*

*For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Here indeed we groan, and long to put on our heavenly dwelling, so that by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we sigh with anxiety; not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. (II Corinthians 5:6-8)*

*For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is the belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself. (Philippians 3:21)*

I remind you that these Scripture passages were all written by Paul at least twenty years before any of the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection were written. "What is raised is imperishable." "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." Does that sound like a physical resurrection to you? I know what a physical body is. I have one. It used to be a lot better than it is today. But regardless, if this is the kind of

thing that Jesus came back in - end of story, not worth telling! The Gospel accounts also make this clear, by the way: Jesus appears and disappears at will; He walks through walls; He is unrecognizable to His closest friends until He allows them to recognize Him. Jesus does not come back from the dead in a “physical body,” not unless you change every definition we have ever known or used for the word “physical.”

I think the evidence for the Resurrection of Jesus is overwhelming. Most of you tend to think so too, or you wouldn't be here. I think you cannot explain the history of our world with any fairness or honesty without conceding that Jesus appears to His disciples. Some of them see Him. Some of them touch Him. Some of them talk with Him, and eat with Him. Some of them know it is a vision, only more real than any reality they have ever experienced before. Others know it is real, only more like a vision than anything they have ever experienced before. *And they make no effort to distinguish between these two.* They tell their stories with awe and with conviction, and the common denominator is not how the appearance happens, but the effect it has on people. Again: The Bible attempts no distinction between inward and outward experiences of the Resurrection. *You* may want to draw that line, but you should remember that they couldn't, and didn't try. The Apostle Paul is witness of the Resurrection just as much as Mary Magdalene, or Peter. The Damascus Road qualifies as an appearance of the Risen Lord just as much as Thomas feeling His Master's wounds, or Mary discovering who the gardener really is. And if you *really* want to look at the results, the Damascus Road outranks them all.

Jesus “appeared” (whatever that means) to His disciples in a spiritual body (whatever that means). Are you uncomfortable with mystery? Me too. That's why I am religious. If I could explain everything, I wouldn't have to be religious. Then I could go for the Christian Fact, instead of the Christian Faith. I could be objective instead of subjective - an object instead of a living being. In any case, Jesus appears in a spiritual body, unlike any physical body we have ever known. We don't know how a spiritual body works - what it is capable of, what its limitations are, or even if there are any limitations. We have never had one - yet. We have no experience to draw on. And that leaves us with the mystery of dimensions beyond our understanding - the intersection of the Kingdom of Heaven with our own earthly domain. And especially with the realization that Jesus is alive: That death could not hold Him. That all He tried to teach us, and came to reveal to us, is true - especially the message of

God's profound, incredible love for us, and of the future that awaits us. Which instantly translates into a huge "OOPS" inside us. With that flash of awakening, like a lighting bolt that illuminates all the landscape we have ever known, most of the ways and reasons surrounding our lives are changed to dross, and are seen in an entirely different light: He was right ... His authority is real ... and He lives!

To be fair, those who emphasize the physical resurrection of Jesus don't mean to reduce it down to minuscule nonsense, like sometimes their words do. They mean to claim the parts about Jesus being Messiah and the Son of God, and that His Resurrection proves it - and along with that, proves the authenticity of the salvation He brings, and the everlasting LIFE He promises. So we have some common ground, but it's much too small - as in narrow, picayune, minuscule - because then the implication, often stated outright, is that this Resurrection event happened once, two thousand years ago, and that the whole world is supposed to believe it based on that one event: It is now over and past, and the rest of us are supposed to trust those who told of it because they were eyewitnesses. And nothing new or current can ever come of it, except that those who believe the ancient records are supposed to convince others to believe the ancient records.

No wonder it's so important for fundamentalists to insist that the Scriptures can contain no errors, despite all evidence to the contrary. Since their faith depends on the absolute accuracy of the record that tells about Jesus' appearances, any hint that the record might have flaws of any kind is terribly threatening. Easter is *because* the Bible says it is, *and the way* the Bible says it is. Therefore, fundamentalists try to make it sound like it has precision, that the technicalities are all in place, and that no "good" person can doubt that it happened just as it is portrayed. Except that Matthew is sure the disciples see the Risen Lord for the first time in Galilee, while Luke thinks it happens in Jerusalem. They can't even tell the difference between one end of the nation and the other, but I'm forbidden to wonder if they got all the other details right?

The difference between "a set of beliefs" and real faith is the awareness that comes from *our own* encounters with the Risen Lord. Nobody can live off of somebody else's faith. "Back then," some people had experience with the Living Christ that convinced them that He was alive. But nobody - NOBODY - ever believed because SOMEBODY ELSE saw Him. Track it with me:

(1) Mary Magdalene is the first to see Jesus. She tells the disciples, but *“they would not believe it.”* (Mark 16:9-11)

(2) Two disciples encounter Jesus on a country road. They go back and tell the others, *“but again, no one believed them.”* (Mark 16:12-13)

(3) The women from Galilee return from the tomb and tell the eleven disciples, *“but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.”* (Luke 24:1-12)

(4) The whole Gospel of John is about people not believing, including the story of Thomas, whom we have nicknamed “Doubting Thomas.” The other disciples tell him, *“We have seen the Lord,”* but Thomas refuses to believe until he sees and touches for himself. (John 20:24-28)

It isn't just Thomas, you see. They were all like that. They had walked and worked with Jesus, and Jesus had told them what to expect, told them that He would rise from the dead, told them to be ready for it. And still they would not believe each other when it happened. **NOBODY BELIEVED BECAUSE SOMEBODY ELSE SAW HIM.**

But *you* are supposed to believe because somebody else saw Him? His own disciples would not believe until they themselves saw Him - would not even believe each other - but you are supposed to believe because I or they or somebody else tells you? *That* is His plan? *That* is what Jesus was counting on? He would appear physically to a few folks for a few weeks, they would tell everybody else, and it would work? All over the world, all through the ages? Until now, when *your* faith is supposed to depend on somebody telling somebody down through the generations for two thousand years? You believe on the basis of an eye-witness two thousand years in the past?! No wonder we have a society in which thousands can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn't make any difference in their lives. They are just as depressed, afraid, and self-centered as before. We can believe in the Resurrection but it doesn't cut our greed or interfere with our adultery or idolatry? It doesn't bring the joy that transforms, or put us into living churches that demonstrate the **WAY** of Life that knows Christ's Kingdom is real?

Have you ever wondered why Jesus didn't appear to Pilate? What about to the Chief Priest, or to the Sanhedrin? That would have been appropriate, don't you think? “Hey, fellas, remember me?” (I would have liked that scene, which is just about my style, and is one of the big

differences between me and Jesus.) What about Jesus appearing to Caesar? Why not settle it once and for all, if that really is the purpose - if we are going to do this Resurrection thing in some overt way that nobody can ever doubt, ever again? Why doesn't Jesus just walk in on Caesar and make it *really* clear, to the whole world? "Hey bud, move over, I'm back."

But that's not like Jesus, is it? It's not like our God to do it that way. That's how we keep wanting them to be, how we keep wanting to make it sound, but that's not how they operate. They offer ... make it possible ... invite ... encourage ... come to share and to influence - just as much as we are comfortable with, just as much as we will allow. But no shoving, no coercion, no breaking the Prime Directive (God's decision to never do anything that would destroy our free will). A book with no errors would be like the Resurrected Jesus walking in on Caesar: it closes down the options, takes away the learning and growing on our part, turns from faith to fact - and in the process, cuts out love and life and meaning. That's how to get automatons, not living, growing souls. Jesus comes to us, and for us, because each one of us matters - because the real issue is our awakening, our growth, our conversion; our coming alive in faithfulness and obedience; our participating in the LIFE He reveals and calls us into. These methods and techniques (including all the pathos of the Passion Story) *always* draw me back to the conclusion that Jesus is not after puppets, He's after real people; that Jesus doesn't want little cookie-cutter Christians, He wants pilgrims, disciples, and apostles, alive and aflame with the love of the God He has revealed. He wants followers fearless to be and become their true selves in His presence - because He has freed us from sin and death and the devil, and all the fear and loneliness and false securities they represent. Why do we try so hard to make the Resurrection fact and certainty, when God and Jesus work so hard to keep it faith and prayer?

Easter is about a LIVING LORD! And you don't have to be petrified for fear that some ancient record isn't perfect, not if you believe in a *Living* Lord. If Luke got confused, so what? For all we know, he had never been to Israel, and didn't know the difference between Galilee and Judah. Or perhaps Matthew failed to read Mark carefully. Do you think that actually matters, if our Risen Lord is really RISEN?! If Jesus is alive, the Bible is precious for whatever information we can get from it, but Easter doesn't stand or fall because somebody saw Him two thousand years ago. The truth is, we believe just like they did. That is, we believe

when we *encounter the Risen Christ ourselves*. *Just like them*, we do not believe it until WE encounter the Risen Christ. We may long to - we may be very eager as we hear the witnesses and feel the soul stirring within us. But it takes true encounter before we truly believe - the kind of belief that changes our lives, our values, our goals, how we try to reach those goals, why we are alive, what we live for, what we care about, where our hopes lie. We are talking about a Risen Christ who is really here with us - who is at work among us, and who keeps on coming to us, encountering us, changing us, sending us. The Resurrection is about *our* encountering Him too, and about our *living* LIFE with Him.

The Resurrection of Jesus “back then” started the awareness and expectation of the truth and the possibility, but it isn’t real to you until He appears to you also. Nobody believes because somebody else saw Him. From other people’s faith and experience, we get the message of the *possibility*: if they had this experience, if it happened to them, maybe something similar could happen to us ... maybe we should look into it ... maybe we should get more alert and aware, or even invite Jesus into our lives and find out what really happens.

And then it’s no longer just ancient history. Then it’s a whole new ball game: your life ... your identity ... your vocatio ... your reason for being here ... your gifts, influence, and resources enlisted and dedicated to His service ... your life empowered and given eternal meaning and significance by His presence, His partnership, His guidance, His comfort, and yes - YES - by His LOVE.

We cannot have the Resurrection without the Cross. And we cannot have Pentecost without the Resurrection. And if there is no Pentecost - Jesus appearing to you personally - then the Resurrection is only and ever some ancient story that somebody else tries to tell you is really important. Jesus has revealed your importance and preciousness in the eyes of the Omnipotent God, and He invites you to come *with Him* into adventure and purpose, through trials and struggles, to fulfill His promises and to trust His light and life in this lifetime, and in all LIFE to come - and to do so in faith (uncertainty), making mistakes, getting forgiven, and feeling the mercy, grace, guidance, and presence of the Risen Christ yourself, in your own life. He is risen! (He is risen, indeed!) And He didn’t go back up to Heaven in some way that leaves us waiting for Him. He is risen *and here!* (He is risen, indeed!) And Easter IS the Second Coming! *So He is really risen!!!* (He is risen, indeed!) And we have LIFE with Him here, and now ... and forever.

PRAYER

Time speeds quickly on, O Lord our God, and that which was, ceases to be ... and that which was not, comes into being. Yet You are the center of all things: the truth we seek, the beauty we hunger for, the purpose we crave, the love that nourishes our souls into LIFE. We praise Your name, for You are holy. We offer You our lives, for apart from You they are nothing. We thank You for being known to us in the life and Spirit of Jesus Christ, wherein Your love is sure, and present with us, and stronger than sin or death. Heal us, we pray, of all malice. Heal us also of cowardice in the face of opposition. Heal us of tiny, petty concerns that hide the presence of Your Kingdom from us. Heal us also of visions so grand that they have no room for our own time and labor.

You who are the source of all LIFE, take from us all our living that does not flow toward You. In the name of the One who showed us that LIFE in You is unspeakably blessed, in the name of Jesus Christ, our Resurrected Lord, we pray. Amen.