

“That’s Not How This Works”

I Corinthians 15:19-26; Acts 10:34-43; Luke 24:1-13

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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The Lord is Risen! The Lord is Risen, indeed!

The wonderful declaration that Christ is Risen presents every person with a decision: Do we believe or not? Is the testimony about Resurrection true? And if so, so what?

The problem, putting it coarsely, is that Jesus was dead. And dead people are supposed to stay dead. Dead people coming alive is not how this works. As the Esurance people say: *“That’s not how this works. That’s now how any of this works.”* [here run YouTube commercial]

So this message really has two parts. The first is “That’s not how this works.” The second is “That’s exactly how this works.” Say those with me: “That’s not how this works.” “That’s exactly how this works!

Sometimes the stoutest believers falter. A clergy colleague, concluding a note to me this week, declared: “Have a grave-filled Easter!” Blame it on the auto-correct function of his electronics! By the way, he wrote back and said he meant a “grace-filled Easter.” Right there may be next year’s Easter sermon!

But I digress. Even Jesus’ disciples didn’t think that’s how this works. Luke tells us in the Gospel that the women who had been followers of Jesus went to anoint the body. They found Jesus’ body was gone, and the men in dazzling clothes—angels, anyone?—reminded them that Jesus told them he would rise from the dead. Their memory jogged, the women told this to the eleven apostles and the other disciples. “But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” For you see, that’s not how this works.

The movie “Risen” is the latest cinematic interpretation of the challenge faced by everyone considering the truth of the Resurrection.

A Roman tribune (army officer) who reports to Pontius Pilate is responsible for securing Jesus' burial tomb so that the body would not be stolen by Jesus' disciples. When the tomb is discovered empty, the tribune is responsible for finding the truth of what happened. The search leads him to...well, watch the movie!

The early Church does not skirt the challenge of this question of belief in the Resurrection. Paul, in today's letter to the church in Corinth, presents the dilemma plainly: *"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."* That is, having no hope is better than hope that ends at the grave.

For some of us, our struggle with affirming the Resurrection is in tension with the reality that Jesus' teachings and ethics were of the highest order. So we acknowledge his great teaching or go so far as to say—as Islam and Judaism both do—that he was a great prophet.

The reply to this limited view is best expressed by C.S. Lewis, a contemporary of J.R.R. Tolkien (Lord of the Rings). Lewis wrote The Chronicles of Narnia, The Screwtape Letters and many other allegories of Christian faith. In Mere Christianity he says plainly: *"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on the level of the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, or is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great moral teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."*

The declaration of the early Church was that the Resurrection confirmed their claim that Christ was God incarnate. We know from the Gospels that the eleven remaining disciples, and the women named in today's reading, and "all the rest" were witnesses. Paul declares that over 500 people saw Christ alive. So if it is possible that Jesus rose from the dead; if it is possible that, as Paul said, "the last enemy to be destroyed is death," if it is possible that "that's exactly how this works," **how** is this possible?

The first way resurrection works is to understand that the witnesses told the truth. The legal principle that supports this—thank you, Attorney Carveth—is "admission against interest." "Admission against interest" asserts that testimony is presumed to hold greater truth if telling that truth is against the witness' own self-interest. It is clear that the disciples had little to gain and everything to lose—including their lives—by reporting Christ's resurrection. All the remaining eleven except John were martyred, and the history of Christians martyred in the Roman coliseum speaks for itself. Yet these first witnesses encountered something so life-changing that they could not be silent. "That's exactly how this works."

The second way resurrection works is in nature. Martin Luther, the 16th century Protestant reformer, wrote "The promise of Resurrection is not written in books and scrolls alone, but in every leaf in springtime." A seed is planted, dies, and grows to become a plant. What kind of engineering is that? Divine! A cocoon becomes a butterfly? Who would have guessed? God! "That's exactly how this works."

The third way resurrection works is to understand that resurrection is not resuscitation. We are not speaking of a corpse enlivened, but Christ's presence in recognizable yet different form. Like the mystery of the seed becoming plant and cocoon becoming butterfly, part of resurrection is mystery. Later in Luke's Gospel, two men walked with the resurrected Jesus seven miles to the town of Emmaus, but they didn't recognize him until he broke bread with them. In John's Gospel, Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener and doesn't recognize him until he

speaks her name. Again in John's Gospel, the resurrected Jesus shows up on the shore of the Sea of Galilee but the disciples don't recognize him until, after a night of fishing in which they caught nothing, the disciples find they have a net so full of fish they can hardly pull it in. "That's exactly how this works."

The last way belief in the resurrection works is the testimony of modern witnesses. Those modern witnesses take two forms. In the first, they declare with Peter in today's reading from Acts: "*I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in any nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.*" The apostle Peter, even after the Resurrection and like some leaders and people who want to be leaders today, was hung up on distinctions of race and religion. But then, in the story that sets the stage for his affirmation, Peter has a vision of God's welcome for all. So when he gets called to visit the home of Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman army officer, he goes; even though his prior prejudice would have held him back. When he goes to Cornelius' home, the Roman tells him HIS vision that his prayers have been answered and that he should send for "Simon, who is called Peter." That sets the stage for Peter's witness, expressed like this in the paraphrase The Message: "*It's God's own truth, nothing could be plainer: God plays no favorites! It makes no difference who you are or where you're from—if you want God and are ready to do as he says, the door is open.*" So if you can speak of the equality of people, promote respect instead of disdain and love instead of hate, you are witnessing to the earthly power of the Resurrection. "That's exactly how this works."

The second way modern witnesses testify to the Resurrection is belief in, and experience of, eternal life. Proof of Heaven by neurosurgeon Eben Alexander and Heaven is for Real by Todd Burpo are two of the more widely recognized modern books about what are often called "Life after Life" experiences. Some in this church have had such experiences, spoken of in hushed and modest tones because they are so very personal. Nearly 40 of us completed this week a Lenten study of the Gospel of John. The author, the Rev. Adam Hamilton,

shares one such experience from a fellow pastor describing his father's near-death experience:

“Dad was in a field, a beautiful green field out in the countryside. A most beautiful place. He did not want to leave. Time did not exist, he had nowhere to go, but wanted to just dwell in the peace...As he lay down in the field, nearby he heard a stream of water, and off in the distance he heard my grandpa laughing and laughing. Dad said, “Grandpa was so happy.” As Dad sat up, he saw a figure coming toward him...It was Christ...Jesus said to Dad, “Thomas, I am returning you to the prayers of the faithful.”

That's exactly how this works! Death is defeated because Christ lives. Eternal life begins here and now for all who believe. The truth of the disciples' witness, nature's rebirth, the mystery of resurrection and the glimpse of eternal life from witnesses today are exactly how this works. They give us strength for our present trials, power to live triumphantly and hope that is rewarded in victory over death. That's exactly how this works! “The Lord is risen, indeed!” Thanks be to God!