

“Resurrection: Reality and Reach” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Colton Kelsey
Noe Valley Ministry, a progressive Presbyterian Church April 30, 2006

Luke 36b-47: While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.”³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.³⁸ He said to them, “Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?”³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, “Have you anything here to eat?”⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.⁴⁴ Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the Law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.”⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,⁴⁶ and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.

WE ARE CELEBRATING EASTER. We are celebrating Jesus alive! The preposterous and the unacceptable have become genuine and accessible. The resurrection is finally beginning to reveal itself in the lives of the faithful.

And because this is all so hard to grasp, every year at this time, after our rejoicing, after our alleluias, we are invited to join the disciples in an upper room, scratching our heads, whispering our doubts, fearful of believing and equally fearful of not believing.

Indeed it was an impossible situation when those first faithful gathered to discuss their next move. They were hiding: They had been betrayed by one of their own. The crowds had turned against them. Their leader had been executed. Some had denied their relationship to him. Any further development of the ministry of Jesus would almost certainly mean their own deaths. Just before our reading, Cleopas had burst in, breathless with an astonishing tale about their Master, their rabbi, who had come to them on the road to Emmaus, walked and talked with them, had actually eaten with them! Hardly had Cleopas finished, than Jesus himself materialized in the room. You can be sure that all the disciples, not just Thomas, were dazed and doubting! To a person, these folk trembled. They thought they were seeing a ghost. They were terrified.

The Risen Christ did not argue with them. He simply showed them what they needed. He offered his hands and feet for examination, answered questions, reassured and encouraged his friends. He asked for something to eat – just like a teenager coming home from school, or a farmer returning from fields: hey, its been a hard day I am hungry! When Jesus actually ate the fish, the disciples finally began to grasp his substance, his reality. Apparently it was what they needed to believe. And then he charged them, “You are witnesses of these things.”

Now, I am not a teacher or a pastor who demands that any of you believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus Christ. There are, in fact, many ways to explain it away. We can say that the story means simply that the teachings of Jesus are immortal like the plays of Shakespeare or the music of Beethoven, and that their wisdom and truth will impact us

forever. Or we can say that it means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he himself lives among us the way that Socrates does for example, in the good that he left behind, in the lives of all who follow his example. We can say that the language in which the Gospels describe resurrection is the language of poetry and that as such is not to be taken literally but as pointing to a truth more profound than the literal. Or we can reduce it to the coming of spring with the return of life to the dead earth and the rebirth of hope in the despairing soul.

But friends, if I thought that this whole religion business is just an affirmation of the human spirit, or of moral values, of Jesus as the great Example, then, like Pilate, I would wash my hands of it. I believe in the literal Resurrection of Jesus Christ, not just resuscitation of the human body, and probably not in flesh as we know it, but in a real spiritual body – mysterious to be sure, but real. Resurrection is what keeps me safe, forgiven, open, empowered, committed to life. The resurrection is the sureness of God still living among us. In Christ, God "pitched God's tent among us"; God has dwelt with us where we are and as we are. In resurrection, that presence continues.

The resurrection places Jesus on this side of the grave, here and now, in the midst of life. He is standing beside us, within us, strengthening us in this life. On Easter morning God put life in the present tense. God does not give us a promise but a presence; not a hope for the future but power for the present,

The very simplicity of the story is compelling. The truth of the resurrection seems as basic as the law of gravity seems to a child: "no fair jumping up without coming back down." It seems as obvious as rain to a 5th grader who says: "Water vapor gets together in a cloud. When it is big enough to be called a drop, it does." It seems as acceptable as how a 3rd grader explains things: "I'm not sure clouds are formed, but clouds know how to do it, and that's the important thing."

If someone wants proof that this is so, that Jesus returned from death and actually lives, all I can say in honesty is that I have none to give. It defies logic and reason and it breaks the laws of nature, as we understand them. If we are to believe he is really alive, with all that implies, then we have to believe without proof.

And of course that is the only way it could be. If it could somehow be proved, we would lose our freedom not to believe and in that very moment of lost freedom, we would cease to be human beings. Our love of God would have been forced upon us, and love that is forced is not love at all. Love must be freely given. Love must live in the freedom not to love. It must take risks. It is called a leap of faith.

But if we have no proof that he is alive, we certainly have witnesses, over 2000 years of them. And we have the witness of our own lives, of certain deep moments when we were truly aware of the risen Christ living with and within our very selves.

Consider a time when abilities, faded and forgotten, were channeled toward new creativity: that's resurrection. Have you experienced friendships, once killed by frosty misunderstanding, bloom again in warm reconciliation? That's resurrection. If you can remember a moment when Hopes, glimmering and gone, are rekindled by expressions of caring: or when faith, dulled by lack of exercise, dances again to God's everyday rhythms: that's resurrection.

One of the prophets of our age, William Sloane Coffin, once said: "I myself believe passionately in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, because in my own life I have experienced Christ not as a memory, but as a presence. "I believe we all have had such experiences.

For instance, last month a friend asked me to go hiking. It was a stormy day, but the afternoon offered an opening in the skies. It was truly beautiful: a bracing hike with wet, pungent forest and tumbling, rushing waterfalls, a smattering of wild flowers and eerie, hovering fog. We got off the mountain at exactly the right time, just before dusk.

Then my friend backed the car into a ditch. I was horrified! By now the sun had set and it was raining hard. Huge rain pellets pummeled us, but it was the darkness I remember. There was no light. I could not see my hand until it touched my face.

We walked, or patted and slid our way with our feet, for the next five hours. We used voices to find one another when we dropped our tight handgrip. We regularly got disoriented; after stumbling off the road, tapping around to get centered, one would walk one way, the other the opposite way – “No, we were going this way!” “Oh no, I know we were walking this way—.” I got quieter and quieter, imagining with some vividness one or both of us falling and breaking something; or hitting our head. I panicked periodically, sobbed frequently, sometimes believed I would never again see my children or stand in this church.

In those moments, my friend became the Risen Christ, the Christ Spirit, to me. He helped me bring myself back to the present, to take deep breaths, and reclaim some confidence that we were not actually forsaken, that we could stay on the road and we would get rescued. Which we did. The 911 operator eventually picked up the erratic cell phone messages and dispatched county sheriff’s deputy.

It was an experience of resurrection. I found encouragement and strength in the midst of desperation. I was not alone. With my companion, my feelings were heard and held. I began to trust my instincts and abilities, paying attention to my surroundings in a new more alert way. But that was only part of it. In the moment, I also understood that even if I were to die out there, it would be okay. I realized anew that resurrection means not only can I live fully in this life, without fear, and I could also die gracefully, into the next life, without fear.

Jesus said, “You are witnesses,” and we are. Not to the actual resurrected body of Jesus; but to the impact, to the reach of the resurrection, as it extends into every nook and cranny of creation. For the experience of resurrection, the presence of Jesus, is ours to claim, a spiritual reality. He is no longer limited by time and space, but is one who can be experienced anywhere, anytime.

Christian faith is very much a work in progress. You need not panic if you feel inadequate to the challenge of having it all together. You need not give up, if full understanding of Christian faith eludes you. You are in good company. The people who inhabit scripture, like those women at the tomb, often struggle to get a grip on God – and so do the rest of us. The Bible is an open-ended story, When the Easter angel says “He is not here,” it may mean that Jesus Christ is not limited to that place and time, but that he has at all times *been everywhere*. The love of God, there *before* the beginning, is there *after the end*. It is a love that cannot be stopped, not by our fear, not by our silence, and certainly not by mere death.

Ultimately, Easter is the source of how we know that God loves us. It’s the event we can point to and say, “Because of the resurrection, I can know for sure that God is alive and well and loves me! Not only does the Christ love me enough to die for me, he loves me enough to come back for me!” It’s never been expressed more eloquently than Albert Schweitzer did in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*: He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old by the lake-side He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word, “Follow thou Me,” and sets us to the task which He

has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience who He is.

I can't tell you exactly what happened at that tomb site Easter morning, but I can proclaim that somehow Jesus the Christ got up with life in him again, and God's glory upon him. He got up and he said, "Don't be afraid." Rich person, poor person, ill and dying, scared, lost, skeptical, those at the end of life and those with life stretching down a wide path. Don't be afraid.

He said, "Feed my sheep." Which might be why we try to explain away that person eating fish in an upper room; because if we take him literally, if we feed those sheep, love those lambs, we have to look at the terrible needs of the lambs and our own abundance and try to make something better of it, something with more justice and freedom – and love.

He said "Peace be with you." And we who have heard so much tragic news that we can hardly recognize good news; we wonder how that can be. Yet Jesus wishes us peace in a world that rages with hatred and war and genocide and cruelty. And somehow we find it inside of us, and we believe that someday, some how, it might be out in the world as well.

The resurrected Christ lives today, new life when you least expect, a real companion when you feel most alone, a light you can't see but you know it is there, the sun behind the clouds, God's promise kept, hope which is alive and real. Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Resurrection is not to convince the incredulous nor to reassure the fearful, but to enkindle the believers. Maybe there is some proof that God raised Jesus from the dead. Perhaps the proof is in the full hearts of his transformed disciples, in a spirit-filled fellowship, in a church alive.

I invite you to consider an image of resurrection looks like to you. My own current image is myself standing on a dock, facing a storm of huge seas and waves and wind, and Jesus standing there with open arms, saying "Peace," calming the sea. Phoebe offered another image. Last month during one of our freak hailstorms, she looked out to see a flowerpot mounded with ice balls from the sky. And through them was sprouting up the daffodil she had planted after our Stewardship Sunday.

May you find the image, the story, the proof that compels you. Then go and be witnesses.

LET US PRAY

if we showed you
our hands,
would you find them nicked
from building a house
for the homeless;
or a callous on our thumb
from using the TV remote
too much?

if we showed you
our feet,
would you find them toughened
by walking the corridors
of a hospice
with the terminally ill;
or wrinkled by too many hours
in the hot tub?

if we showed you our hearts,
would you find them broken
over the struggles of
the lost, the little, the last, the least;
or would they be clogged
with the plaque
of our consumerized lives?

if we truly want to be
your witnesses,
God of the empty grave,
would you show us -- how?