

This morning, I want to talk about resurrection.

That might sound obvious, given that this is Easter Sunday. After all, look at the names of the hymns that bookend today's service. "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today" and "Jesus Christ is Risen Today" are two of the best known and most expected Easter hymns.

We *are* a progressive Christian church. We embrace the questions and dance with our doubts. We are comprised of educated, rational people; a congregation that focuses on the teaching, healing, justice-seeking ministry of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, within a tradition that was born in the Age of Reason; prizing the ability to be independent and free-thinking people, subtle enough to appreciate shades of gray over theological certainty, and open to embracing and understanding the social, cultural, political and economic issues that call us to be a justice-seeking people.

And today, I want to preach on resurrection, not only because it is Easter Sunday, but because it is a key part of our faith story. However we may hear the accounts in Matthew, Luke and John, the empty tomb of Mark, and the accounts of Peter, Paul or James, we need the story of the Resurrection in order to be Easter people in a Good Friday world.

A colleague in Minneapolis writes,

"I need the Resurrection because my sister is sick and can't afford insurance,
-because I told a weeping Haitian mom, 'No, I can't take your son home with me,'
-because I was rushed off a Jerusalem street so a robot could blow up a bag that could've blown us up,
-because I've exploded in rage and watched my children's tiny faces cloud with hurt,
-because evil is pervasive and I participate.

"I need the Resurrection because it promises that in the end all wrongs are made right. Death loses. Hope triumphs. And Life and Love...Prevail."¹

In the end, how we understand, believe, or disbelieve the story that is celebrated every Easter, is secondary to the message it bears—love will always win; hope was there all along; time and time again, a small, seemingly powerless minority will rise from the bottom up and prove over and over again that the majority is not always right and the status-quo must always be challenged; a new chapter will surprisingly lift us open again after we believed we had reached the closing pages of our own book in disappointment and loss.

We need to be talking about resurrection. We may not agree on the particulars, but it is right here and now in front of us. Since the day Mary, Peter and John raced to the tomb, Jesus' followers have been running this story through their minds and hearts, and we are doing it today.

Progressives will like a new article by Marcus Borg called, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Physical/Bodily or Spiritual/Mystical?* In it, Borg says, "I begin with the positive, with what we can say with certainty about the meaning of Easter in the gospels and the New Testament. It is twofold: Jesus lives and Jesus is Lord."

But Borg goes on to say that the risen Jesus is not necessarily a physical reality. He points to several accounts in the New Testament, explaining,

"The risen Jesus appears in a locked room (Jn. 20). He journeys with two of his followers for a couple of hours and is not recognized, and when he is recognized, he vanishes (Lk. 24). He appears in both Jerusalem (Luke and John) and Galilee (Matthew and John). He appears to Stephen

in his dying moments (Acts 7). He appears (years later) to Paul in or near Damascus as a brilliant light (Acts 9).

“These texts are not about Jesus being restored to his previous life as a physical being. If such events happen, they are resuscitations: resuscitated persons resume the finite physical life they had before, and will die again someday. Whatever affirming the resurrection of Jesus means, it does not mean this.

“Moreover, what would it mean to say that the risen Jesus is a physical reality? That he continues to be a molecular, protoplasmic, corpuscular being existing somewhere? Does that make any sense? How can the risen and living Jesus be all around us and with us, present everywhere, if he is bodily and physical?

The orthodox response was thoughtfully presented by Tony Jones, in his article, *No, Marcus Borg, the Resurrection Does Not ‘Make Sense’ – That’s What I Love about It*. He writes:

“What kind of Christianity is it that denudes Jesus of a real, historical, bodily resurrection? It might not ‘make sense’ that Jesus would be bodily resurrected two millennia ago, and yet still cosmically reign today. But, for me, I can live with that unrelieved paradox.”²

I think that the truth of the resurrection story lies in how it fills us with hope that the story of this new way of being in the world may one day prevail; that the drastically and completely inclusive way of Jesus is alive and flowing in the world, and we are the hearts and hands active and moving, to bring a new way into reality.

The message spilled across all barriers. In the Book of Acts, a Roman centurion named Cornelius professed faith, even though he was an outsider. Upon hearing his profession, Peter addressed the people there saying, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” The word, “fear” used in this context is misleading—it actually refers to a state of awe. But here in this passage, we see the beginnings of a sense of inclusion that would eventually invite everyone in. We are not there yet...but if Christians are truly to be changed by their own profession of faith and the living of it, then an equal place at the table will be set for all.

Ultimately, I think that's where we should land in thinking about the Resurrection, on the notion that something happened that changed everything, including, I hope, us. Bible scholar John Dominic Crossan has been speaking in recent years about the notion of “operational belief,” the idea that whether you believe the Bible stories literally or figuratively, those beliefs ought to make a living difference in your life.

So, it is truth time. Do you believe that your own faith journey through your own understanding of what being Christian means, is making a living difference in your life? (*I’ll let you think about it. This is my five-year review*)

I visited Carol Cavalier in the ICU at Hoag hospital last week. She had multiple strokes, and when I went in, I didn’t know what to expect. What I got was a big smile, and when I asked her how she was, the first thing she could say was, “I am so grateful. I am so blessed.” That is the response of a person whose belief makes a living difference in her life.

Easter is not a time for groping through dusty, musty tomes or tombs to disprove spontaneous generation or even to prove life eternal. It is a day to fan the ashes of dead hope, a day to banish doubts and seek the slopes where the sun is rising, to revel in the faith which transports us out of ourselves and the dead past into the vast and inviting unknown.³

Christian Century editor John Buchanan said, “I have concluded that people turn out on Easter not entirely out of convention and custom, but because at the deepest level they want to hear a word about life in the midst of death.” Like the disciples racing to the tomb, people come out

today more than any other, because they need to hear this particular story, that at the center of our faith is an un-killable spirit, despite all abuse, oppression and suffering.

This is a part of the great faith story that holds together the lives of people who struggle every day to roll boulders off of their own life force: boulders of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, poverty, loss, broken relationships, unemployment, violence, addiction.

Monica Coleman is a professor at the Claremont School of Theology. She writes,

“As one who knows metaphorical and literal death, resurrection matters. To see value in the past after seasons of hopelessness, and to stay in community when reason says to walk away -- is mercy. To break bread with people who have hurt you, and to retell stories that have lost meaning in today’s apathy and nihilism -- is grace. The mystery is not that some people cannot do this; the mystery is that any of us can. Finding life after death is divine activity. Our wills and fortitudes alone shrivel with the task. God maintains hope amidst death.”

Borg concludes his article by saying, “The central meaning of Easter is not about whether something happened to the corpse of Jesus. Its central meanings are that Jesus continues to be known and that he is Lord. The tomb couldn’t hold him. He’s loose in the world. He’s still here. He’s still recruiting for the kingdom of God.”⁴

So then, what if Mary, John and Peter, racing back and forth from the tomb on Easter morning are right? What if the Good Fridays in our lives aren’t necessarily the end of the story? What if Jesus told the truth when he declared, toward the opening of his ministry, that he was turning today’s tears into tomorrow’s laughter?

If he is risen in the hearts of his followers—then we are risen. Risen to believe that our lives can still make a difference.

Is your faith journey here making a difference in your life? (call)

If he is risen and loose in the world, then we are risen to help make a difference.

Despite all the evidence, do you believe that no matter what, there is still another chapter in your book? (call)

If he is risen and loose in the world, then we are risen to help make a difference.

Despite all the evidence, do you believe that we can have wholeness again in our lives? (call)

If he is risen and loose in the world, then we are risen to help make a difference.

Despite all the evidence, do you believe that new life will always rise up in the midst of death? (call)

Let’s end with a variation of the old Easter call-and-response:

He is risen—(*he is risen indeed*)

We are risen—(*we are risen indeed*)

Hope is risen—(*it is risen indeed*)

New life is risen—(*it is risen indeed*)

Love is risen—(*it is risen indeed*) Amen and Alleluia.

Sermon Resources

1 Kara Root is pastor of Lake Nokomis Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, MN and blogs at in the hereandnow.

2 Tony Jones, author of *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* and adjunct professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. <http://blog.tonyj.net/2011/04/no-marcus-borg-the-resurrection-does-not-make-sense-thats-what-i-love-about-it/>

3 ~Author unknown, as quoted in the Lewiston Tribune

4 Marcus Borg, *The Resurrection of Jesus: Physical/Bodily or Spiritual/Mystical?* Patheos, April 18, 2011

<http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Resurrection-of-Jesus-Marcus-Borg-04-18-2011?offset=0&max=1>

Scripture for Easter Sunday A, April 24, 2011

Acts 10:34-43 - 34 Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, 35 but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. 36 You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. 37 That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. 39 We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; 40 but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, 41 not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

John 20:1-18 -1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” 16 Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’ “ 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.