

The Day Everything Changed

John 20:1-18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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July 4, 1776, December 7, 1941 and September 11, 2001 are important dates in history when everything changed.

We don't know the exact date of Christ's resurrection all John tells us is it happened early on the first day of the week. Even so, a new era in the history of the world began right then and there when the stone rolled away and Jesus stepped out of the tomb.

Unlike July 4, 1776, December 7, 1941 or September 11, 2001 no witnesses were there to verify the event causing many to charge, "You can't prove it so don't tell me it really happened."

I've said this every Easter morning since I've been here. Even if there were reporters and camera crews at the tomb broadcasting images around the world the instant the stone rolled away, with scientists on hand to take DNA samples from the Risen Christ to compare with the DNA samples of the Crucified Christ and both two samples came from the same man, there would still be those who'd say, "O.K. you proved your point, Jesus was raised from the dead on Easter morning but you still can't prove his resurrection has anything to do with me!"

No one doubts Jesus was crucified because the crucifixion was documented in official Roman dispatches but there were no objective observers who witnessed Jesus coming out from the tomb.

So what can we say about this? How can believers prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that early on the first day of the week when it was still dark everything changed because Jesus was raised from the dead?

The honest answer is we can't prove any of it any more than we can prove the existence of God.

They say "seeing is believing," others say "believing is seeing." Either way we are speaking about mysteries far beyond our ability to reason our way to God. Using logic and the scientific method only takes you so far before you hit that glass ceiling. So, there's no pretending otherwise, believing in the resurrection only comes by faith. You believe because you believe. You can't explain why, you just do.

C.S. Lewis wrote about his conversion experience that happened one summer night when he and JRR Tolkien took a walk along a brook in the woods near Oxford. Lewis was a committed atheist determined to turn his friends away from their foolish superstitions. They talked about God way into the night until early in the next morning Lewis suddenly found himself believing in God.

Sometime later Lewis and his brother were heading out to meet some friends for a picnic on a motorcycle. Lewis rode in the side car. He later wrote, "I started out on the ride a theist (a believer in God) but by the time we reached our destination I found myself a believing Christian."

Lewis didn't try to explain how it happened, only that it happened. He went from being an atheist to a believer in God to a disciple of Christ. He believed because he believed.

So, faith happens, you believe only because you believe.

Some will say, "It sounds good to me, I have no problem believing that God became one of us to be crucified for our sins and then on the third day be raised from the dead. "So sure I can believe in all that stuff."

But is that all there is to faith, believing in that stuff or is there more that God requires of you? When you think about it being able to say, "I believe Jesus was raised from the dead," doesn't cost you anything unless you're ready to expand your definition of faith in ways that might be inconvenient if not downright dangerous.

This expansive faith empowered Moses to lead God's people out of bondage in Egypt and Martin Luther to outwardly criticize the Church (something that was never done) knowing he'd soon be in hot water with the all powerful Pope. It was a bold faith that inspired Martin Luther King to lead the protests in Selma, Alabama.

You see faith is more than just intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. Real faith, the resurrection faith, is all about trusting your life to Christ as you seek God's will to do the right thing, even if it costs you something, even if it costs you everything.

A prime example of faith in action is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane pleading for his life the night before he died. "Nevertheless," Jesus prayed, "not my will but yours be done."

It's when you pray "not my will but yours be done" the resurrection faith kicks in full force. Suddenly, out of nowhere Christ rises up within you triggering

the startling realization that resurrection isn't just for the dead, it's actually for the living. Easter morning changed everything for good.

"Ah!" you say, "Then tell me why the world is a broken mess. Why is there still poverty and violence, corruption and cover-ups? If Christ conquered sin and death once and for all where's the evidence?"

I submit you see evidence in people everywhere who trust their lives to Christ by seeking God's will and then doing it no matter the consequences. And even when they get it in the neck there's a calm peace and strength that comes from within and beyond them as the Risen Christ transforms them into new creations. They're basically the same but they're also basically different. Their identities remain intact but now there's a vibrancy and determination to love God, their neighbor and last but not least themselves in any way called upon to do so.

Take a close look at Mary Magdalene when she went looking for Jesus tomb that morning. She went to the garden searching for a corpse but she was met by Christ. At first she didn't recognize him until he spoke her name. For Mary at that precise moment everything suddenly changed for good. Confusion was overcome by clarity, grief turned in joy, fear was trumped by courage. Then she ran back and passed it on to the disciples.

Having said that I never quite understood why the Risen Christ didn't also show himself to Pilate the Roman Governor, Caiaphas the High Priest or the Roman soldiers who mocked, beat and crucified him. Why didn't Jesus show himself to them? Jesus could have appeared and rattled them if only to have the last laugh.

But he didn't. Why? That would become the job of the disciples. They came out of hiding and boldly returned to the Temple proclaiming Christ is risen even though they knew arrest, torture and death was inevitable. You see for them everything changed. No longer afraid of their own shadows they were transformed into what Chesterton called "fearless, happy troublemakers." Fearless because Christ gave them courage, happy because they knew God was with them always and troublemakers because Christ's gospel of peace and justice for everyone was all about challenging and overcoming the world system, that is, human society organized outside the authority of God.

So maybe you can't rationally prove Christ was raised from the dead but you can see evidence when everything changes in ordinary peoples' lives who turn around and do extraordinary things by performing sacrificial deeds of kindness and acts of love, showing faithfulness to their convictions and the

determination to right wrongs and speak truth to power in spite of fire, dungeon and sword.

Maybe the world is still a broken mess but no one can deny the changes God's people brought to the world that are a preview of the world's total transformation when Christ comes again in power and glory bringing the Kingdom of God with him.

So the skeptics' question, "Even if you can prove the resurrection really happened, what does it have to do with me?" should be the believer's question too. If you are a believer, what does Christ's resurrection have to do with you? If you believe Christ was raised from the dead are your attitudes and behaviors changing for the good, are you aware of but also terribly bothered by poverty, violence, prejudice and injustice? And finally are you allowing Christ to live in and through you just enough to make people wonder whatever it is that inspires you and then wanting "it" for themselves?

I'd like to finish with a story I shared with you on Christmas Eve several years ago.

John Bryson Chane, the bishop at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC attended a conference in Spain where he met the bishop of Northern Sudan, one of the most violent places on earth.

The Sudanese bishop gathered his clergy and people in their cathedral, which was really just a tin roof held up by 20 poles when suddenly their worship was interrupted by a mob of child soldiers recruited by the Janjaweed, a criminal organization that terrorized the countryside. These boy soldiers each one high on drugs and carrying an automatic weapon grabbed the bishop and dragged him outside. Then the leader of this Janjaweed regiment of children forced him to kneel.

This leader was all of 15 years old and he carried an AKA-47. After kneeling him down the boy pointed his gun to the bishop's head saying, "Today I will kill you, but first, do you want a cigarette?" The bishop replied, "No," but he did ask the boy, "Instead may I have a moment to pray?"

He then began to pray. "I thank you Lord, that today I know where I will go, and I thank you for the gift of your son Jesus Christ. And I ask you to forgive this young man who is about to take my life, that he too might have a place in your heaven."

After the bishop finished his prayer, this boy soldier dropped his weapon, reached down and picked up the bishop with his hands, looked him in the eye and said, "I want what you have."

Maybe we can't prove the existence of God, let alone the resurrection of Jesus Christ but stories like this must make even the most ardent skeptic to pause and wonder.

Two thousand years of Church history tells us many blunders and sins were committed in Christ's name and yet stories like this Sudanese bishop trusting his life to God and forgiving his enemies assure us that despite all the sin and sadness in the world, Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed and his kingdom is coming sooner than you think.

May all people of good will, and not so good will, experience the resurrection so we all can be raised up to the joyous reality of Christ empowering us to become more like him and then be willing to bring his Gospel of justice, peace and love to the people in our neighborhood and beyond through Christ our Lord. Amen