

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalms 118:1-2, 14-24 1

Corinthians 15:1-11

John 20:1-18

If you've ever spent much time around children, you know that one of their favorite pastimes is to have someone read a story to them. Most children zero in on one or two favorite stories and with remarkable accuracy, they learn to recite the entire story from memory. Little ones can do that...two or three years old. It's a remarkable skill and it speaks to how invested they become in the mystery and magic of storytelling. But not all favorite stories are fiction. Some of them are historically accurate...like the stories they hear about all the things that happened to Mommy and Daddy on the night they were born! Stories like that stay with them for a lifetime and often get quite embellished along the way. Stories help us understand the world around us and introduce us to new ideas, new ways of thinking and different ways of living. Some of them are fiction and some of them a fact. Both kinds of stories help us organize our internal world and sort out all our experiences and our emotions as well as our relationships. Stories are simply very helpful!! But when we hear a story that is just over-the-top absurd in terms of its credibility, we refer to it as a tall tale. Now sometimes tall tales have a moral or a message to share with us. They make us think. Other times they're simply entertaining and too far from reality to be taken seriously. To some people, the resurrection of Jesus is a tall tale...not to be believed. But I'm here to tell you it's fact, not fiction. Probably one of the greatest and most controversial pieces of literature ever compiled is the Holy Bible. I've recently started reading a book called Holy Imagination written by one of my favorite professors at VTS: Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams who teaches Old Testament. There are so many contradictions in the Old Testament that it's easy for a person's head to swim trying to sort out contradictory and competing narratives. This book sheds some light not on trying to make all of it become logical and sequential, but to understand the stories told as conversations that enlighten us and stimulate and dialogue between us and the text. The Bible is full of metaphors and poetry and along the way there are some factual stories. The gaps and the sparse language and the outright contradictions engage our imaginations as we return to the same stories repeatedly searching for new discoveries. And we usually find them. Any Biblical scholar will tell you, those new discoveries pop up all the time and shed light on old ideas and familiar stories that we know by heart, but perhaps didn't completely understand the first few hundred times we heard them. The Bible contains some of the greatest stories ever told and helps us understand the history of the relationship between God and God's creation. It's an ongoing story. Actually, it's a love story...the culmination of which is the New Testament. This relationship between God and God's creation is played out in the life and ministry and mission of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a controversial figure in his own day...and he remains controversial today. Most people know something about Jesus, but not everyone believes that Jesus was the Son of God...that Jesus was divine...that Jesus was God having come to live among us in human form. For some people that's just too much of a tall tale to believe. And the resurrection...well that's really a tall tale!! It defies all logic...and for some people...it's just too good to be true. It would seem then that Jesus has to be

experienced in order for the full force of his message and teachings to reach not just the skeptics, but those of us who profess to believe...at least intellectually. It's not that Jesus has to be seen to be believed...but he does have to be experienced to be believed. We all know people whose faith is unshakable...not because it's logical or can be proven, but because it has been experienced. And, as we all know, there's no teacher like experience. When something powerful happens to you, it doesn't have to be logical or provable in order for you to know down to your toes that it's true and it's real. That's the kind of experience we hear about in the stories we know about Jesus. Something happened that moved people...something that logic couldn't explain...but something that touched them deeply and changed them forever. Sometimes it happens in an instant and sometimes it happens gradually over time. Sometimes it happens to people open to the possibility and sometimes it happens to hardcore skeptics like St. Paul...who was a professional persecutor of the early church before Jesus got hold of him. There seems to be no rhyme or reason to which people will get bitten by the faith bug. But the folks who are open to the possibility aren't more gullible...they're just more reachable. The world was in a mess when Jesus walked the earth...very much the same kind of mess the world is in now...although climate change wasn't an issue just yet. But Jesus addressed the issues of social injustice, hypocrisy, the inhumanity of man to his own kind, lopsided political power, and atrocious military might that oppressed people and destroyed lives. There's nothing new under the sun in terms of sin. There's nothing new under the sun in terms of what God wants for God's creation and the amount of resistance that comes from mankind either. We still don't want to play by God's rules...even though we know what they are...even though we know that God wants only good for us. We humans continue to want to be in charge...to be independent...to call our own shots...even if it means hurting others and sometimes hurting them profoundly...and putting ourselves at risk. Today is Easter. Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus almost 2000 years ago. When Jesus walked out of that tomb, he changed the world forever. It hasn't been the same since, although we don't seem to have learned the lessons Jesus so desperately tried to teach us and show us. After the resurrection, life and death would never again be seen in the same way. We humans have been talking about it and celebrating it ever since. Jesus was seen by over 500 people after his crucifixion...many of whom new him or knew who he was. Many people have gone to their own death because they refused to recant what they knew about Jesus and his resurrection...and people don't volunteer to die for a myth. They knew it...down to their bones! Many of you know it, too, down to your bones...not because you made an intellectual decision to believe, but because you've experienced the presence of Jesus in one way or another and you know that he is real...that he lived, he taught, he died on a cross, he rose from the dead, and he continues to live...just as we will one day. All human fears can be traced to the fear of death. That's the one thing that all humans are afraid of. Do you know what that fear is about? It may be about the experience itself. What will it be like? Will it be painful? Will it be scary? Will I know what's happening? It's not just the experience of death, though, it's also knowing that this life will be over and this life is the only life we know. We can't imagine any other kind of life. And we know, that when death comes, we can't come back. This life will be gone...but life itself is not gone. Jesus opened that door for us to continue to live...to be transformed into life everlasting. It's not just a myth or wishful thinking. God doesn't lie to us. Jesus never lied to us. And Jesus clearly told us that there is a life after this life...a life where there are no tears and there is no pain or heartbreak. It's not pie in the sky. These are credible promises from a reliable source...Jesus himself. All the stories in the Bible are about God's love for God's creation and the rebellious nature of the human beings God entrusted to be stewards for that creation. We've done a lousy job as stewards. But God has been pursuing us from the outset. And in Jesus God found the way to be with us in our world in

a material way...a way that we could see and hear God and learn what God was like and what God wanted from us. In Jesus we've been provided with the bridge to get from this sinful side of the abyss back under the safety of God's wing. The resurrection of Jesus is not a myth or wishful thinking. Too many people saw him, touched him, ate with him. The story is not fiction; it's fact. It's out of the ordinary to be sure, but that doesn't mean it's not real. That doesn't mean it's not believable. The ones who looked Jesus in the eye knew the power in him. They'd never experienced anything like it. And the ones who experience him now know that Jesus and the stories about him are every bit as real as the stories we tell our children about what happened to Mommy and Daddy on the night those children were born. Some experiences don't have to be proven in order to be believed. And some experiences are never forgotten! Jesus gave us love...more love than any of us deserve...but love nevertheless. And Jesus taught us a better way to live than the gut instincts of human beings. What he taught us takes enormous effort, but it's well worth it. When we practice what Jesus taught us, we get a glimpse of how life could be and should be...and perhaps is in the kingdom Jesus has prepared for us. And no matter how bad things get...no matter how messed up this world is...no matter how badly we behave or how poor our judgement is...there is always hope. There's always evidence of God's love if we only have the will to see it and the strength to trust it. Can we prove it to a skeptic? Nope. We can't. Can we live with the knowledge that we've already experienced it? Yes, we can. If we haven't yet experienced it, can we hope for the time when we will? Absolutely. The gift Jesus gave us is unfettered access to God and the playbook for living in God's kingdom in this life and in this world. Because Jesus is alive again, so are we. And that will never change.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.