

West Branch Friends Meeting
April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday
Sue McCracken, Pastor

Being a Doubter

Here we are once again, coming together on the holiday known throughout many parts of the world, as Easter – and we Americans do love our holidays! I'm fairly certain I would get different responses on the meaning of the holiday depending on which one of you I asked.

If I asked my grandchildren, I'm fairly certain they would tell me that Easter means Easter baskets with candy and toys, and an Easter egg hunt. In fact, my six year old grandson just this past week was telling me he thinks the Easter bunny has to be real because otherwise how would the toys get in the baskets?!

Some of you in my generation might add that it includes a family meal with relatives.

If I asked Hallmark, I would get a dollar sign response due to the 40 million cards sold each year for the Easter holiday. (And thanks, Shelley, for the Easter card that arrived in the mail this week)!

If I asked a regular church attender, I would most likely get a response that is of the religious variety: 'It's the day Jesus rose from the grave,' or 'It's the foundation of our religion.'

I'm also counting on the fact that if I asked most of you to describe what happened on Easter morning, I might get some different responses, but all would have something to do with an empty tomb and Jesus rising from the dead.

So I'm not going to talk about what happened because, in reality, we don't really have accurate details since the gospels were all written from stories passed down by word of mouth and for at least forty or fifty years after the event happened.

For instance, we know that some of the first New Testament writings – from Paul - written before any of the four gospels – disagree with the four gospel writers on whether there was a tomb into which Jesus was laid and on whether that tomb literally became empty. The New Testament provides us with five stories that purport to put the Easter experience into words. But...did the women see the risen Christ at or near the tomb on that first Easter morning? Mark says no; Matthew says yes. Luke says no and John says yes, but - it was Mary Magdalene's *second* visit to the tomb that this 'seeing' occurred, not her first.

The gospel writers also disagree on whether the resurrection occurred *on* 'the third day' or 'after three days.' They disagree on who saw the raised Christ first. Paul says it was Peter; Matthew said it was a woman at the tomb, Luke notes it was Cleopas, in the village of Emmaus, and John says it was Mary Magdalene.

I could point out a number of other contradicting gospel statements, but what I would like to propose is that it doesn't really matter **WHAT** you believe about the specific events as long as you note that without Easter, there would be no Christianity as we know it today. Whatever it was that constituted the Easter experience, the obvious fact is that there was enormous power in that moment that cries out for explanation. That power changed lives; it redefined the way that people thought about God; it created a new consciousness, and in time it even caused a new holy day to be born. Each of these changes points beyond itself to something that must be big enough to account for these changes.

But I would like to spend a little time talking about Thomas this morning. Everyone has probably heard the phrase 'Doubting Thomas' because this small piece of the Easter event kind of resonates with some of us. In fact, I'm guessing some of you may consider me to be a doubter considering some of the questions I've raised over these past months. But here's the thing....I don't think it's a negative aspect of one's faith to question some of our previous teachings. So let's talk for a minute about Thomas.

Greg Garrett writes "We've been awfully hard on him over the years, which I think is unfortunate because it allows us to look down on him,

to distance ourselves from his situation, to think of ourselves as somehow different or even better than he is, which we most certainly are not.” And if we look at passages surrounding Thomas’ doubts about whether or not Jesus was present in a physical body, we see John contrasting Thomas with himself, the Beloved Disciple, and also with Peter, both of whom believed with much less evidence than Thomas had. But once again, I have to remind myself that the book of John was written almost one hundred years after Jesus’ life and death, and perhaps the author was trying to make a point rather than recording actual history.

Traditionally, down through history, there have been two ways Biblical commentaries have viewed Thomas. Matthew Henry’s is perhaps one of the commentaries most often referred to, written in the 18th century. He summarizes Thomas’ lack of belief as “not only a sin, but a scandal,” and that Thomas was a fool not to believe in the testimony of others. On the flip side, Augustine and Thomas Aquinas both believed that when Thomas saw Jesus, the man, and believed that he was God, that that act took a tremendous amount of faith.

So did Thomas believe or not? And does it matter? Because today there are many doubters that Jesus physically came back to life - doubting much like Thomas. One of my go-to theologians, Bishop Jack Spong, doesn’t believe there was a physical resurrection. And, I have to admit, whether I agree with him or not, he makes some valid points when all the facts are laid out including some of Paul’s writings that talk about Jesus being raised from the dead into the life of God.

But here’s the thing....SOMETHING did happen that changed everything, including, I hope, us. The disciples went from forsaking Jesus, to displaying a willingness to go anywhere and do anything that would support the reality they were quite convinced they had come to know.

I love the quote that I asked Carolyn to put on the back of the bulletin because it’s been an Easter theme I’ve carried with me since Stan Bauer brought the idea in one of his first Easter messages at Pleasant Plain. For me, Keating really gets at the heart of Easter when he says, “Easter, with its grace of interior resurrection, is the radical healing of the human condition.” In other words, the resurrection story, however

we understand it, whether or not we can explain it, should make a difference in our minds and hearts. It's supposed to! That's what resurrection does – it proclaims hope over despair, and it tells us that whatever happens to us, the end is not really the end of things.

But I also have to wrestle with what it means for the church today because if the church and Christianity are going to remain relevant today and into the future, we have to continue to proclaim the message of Jesus – teaching us to recognize the interconnectedness of all life, and the power of love over hate.

Here are five beliefs I think those of us sitting in our churches today have to consider.

- First of all, there **are** still many people looking for a place to connect spiritually within their communities.
- Second, many of us still want to engage our families and ourselves in meaningful service to others.
- Third, there are still a lot of us who want to join together and learn about the art and practices of love, peace, joy, forgiveness, and generosity in the world.
- Fourth, there are a growing number of us who value doubting and questioning the rigid set of beliefs and biases we've been taught during our childhoods.
- And last, many of us still love the example that Jesus set; we seriously consider the Bible our go-to guide, but hesitate to accept the Bible as literal, inerrant, infallible, and universally authoritative.

We have work to do with our internal resurrection to be God's people.

This reminds me of my life with diets. I like to joke that I have a collection of diet books that would rival the library of congress, convincing my mom to let me buy the first one when I was a senior in high school! I was always looking for the next magical cure that would

save me from my love of food – and believe, I've tried them all! But over the years I've stopped perusing the book shelves at Barnes and Noble for the newest diet fad, realizing there is no magical cure: just hard work...eat the right foods, eat less, and exercise. Hard work.

In the same way, there is no magical cure for figuring out all things spiritual. It's a life-long journey that takes study, it takes an open mind, and it takes doubting some of the time. And, for me, it begins by simply looking for that of God in the world around me and in every person I meet.

Internal resurrection to a new life of love, and a new way to be all that we can be in THIS earthly Kingdom of God; that's what Easter means to me.