

Luke 24:1-12

Happy Resurrection Day! What a joy it is to be able to celebrate this day with all of you. The day Jesus was not found in the tomb. The day that brought the promise of a new life for all believers.

So, what do I say about Easter? The world celebrates it with Easter baskets filled with chocolates and jellybeans, and those yummy (or not) marshmallow chicks and bunnies. Egg hunts. Easter bunny breakfasts and in Wesleyville, the Easter bunny rides around the borough in a fire truck with the sirens blaring. It's a fun time for both kids and adults.

There is Christian symbolism in these worldly treats. Sometimes the chocolate is made into the shape of a cross, and we know Jesus died on the cross so that's an easy one. The bunnies represent hope and new beginnings. They're also a symbol for generosity and giving, definitely Christian ideals. The eggs symbolize new life. Jelly beans are just tiny eggs. But chicks? How on earth do chicks have anything to do with Christian symbolism?

I never understood why chicks and Easter went together. I sort of thought it was loosely related to the eggs: new life. That made sense. But I did a google search and found an explanation on healthyspirituality.org. The writer said she watched a chicken protect her chicks—to her death. She stretched out her wings, blocking all harm toward her chicks. And that's what Jesus did on the cross. He stretched out his arms to stand between us and death.

And there's another place in the Bible that talks about God covering us with his wings Psalm 91:4 tells us under God's wings we find refuge, God's faithfulness is a shield and defense. And on his way into Jerusalem Jesus grieves over the children of Jerusalem, saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me" (Matthew 23:37, NLT).

So even when the world doesn't know they are celebrating a religious Easter, they are using symbols that relate directly to the Christian faith. Yet our faith goes far deeper than candy and marshmallow symbols. Our understanding of these symbols is based on a new hope, the hope that because Jesus rose from the tomb he conquered death. It gives us a new understanding of grief. Because Jesus lives, we too will live beyond the life we have on this earth. There is another plane of life where we will be reunited with the triune God and all those who have gone before us who believed that Jesus is God's son, risen from the dead. What an amazing gift.

So how do we achieve this gift? Simply believe. Believe that Jesus is God's son risen from the dead. Believe that God loves us so much that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not die but live for eternity. This is the promise of the resurrection. There is nothing we can do to earn our salvation. We can't give money, we can't pray, we can't take care of the sick, we can't visit the prisoners, none of that will get us covered by God's grace.

But that doesn't mean that we aren't expected to do such things. Why should we when they don't do anything for us? Because we do these things as a response to all we have been given. We do them because we rely upon God, knowing that we have what we need even when we give of our money or ourselves. We give them because we have been given a new life through Christ, because of that empty tomb.

The women who came to the tomb early on Easter Sunday morning were moving toward the graves, expecting anything but an empty tomb. They had seen death before, they had prepared bodies before, every time they were in the graveyard it was the same; the only living beings there were the women themselves, bringing their spices that would hasten decomposition and keep the smell down. Then a year later they would return to gather the bones and put them in a stone box called an ossuary which would be stored in the back of the tomb.

The women are there in the graveyard to anoint the body of the one they had hoped would bring new life to a world desperately looking for it. They felt like anything was possible when Jesus was with them. People had been cured of diseases and demons; even the dead had been brought back to life. They had heard about a kingdom where the last would be first and the first last, where sin was forgiven and brokenness made new, violence and pain were gone. They believed this new world was on its way when Jesus was with them.

But now Jesus was dead, the Romans had nailed him to a cross like a criminal. Jesus had told them he was not of this world, however he was fully human. Jesus, who had changed the lives of so many others was now, like any other human life ends, dead. Now it was time for the women to take care of the body. Certain they would find no life in the graveyard they arrived to find the stone had been rolled away. The body they came to care for was gone. Instead they found 2 men in dazzling white clothes, a brilliant white like the color of a lightning strike. The women were terrified. The men asked them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen." They had expected to find what they always found in the graveyard, death. Instead they discovered an empty tomb and the promise of new, eternal life.

Something new has broken into our world. When Jesus rose from the dead, it signaled the beginning of a new creation, a new world. It signaled the ultimate defeat of death itself and, with it, the sin that caused it in the first place. The kingdom of God is not a distant world but the reality of what happens when heaven and earth come together renewing both. This is the reality we pray for in the Lord's prayer.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul says that Jesus' resurrection was the "first fruits" (we might say "prototype") of what will happen to us in God's future — renewed people in a renewed heaven and earth where God dwells with us and makes us whole (v. 20). We don't have to look for symbols of new life "out there" because it's coming here and, indeed, is here and available for us right now. The One who was dead is now alive, and, because he lives, we, too, can live. We have the light of life that illumines everything and makes all things new!

Because of this, those who follow the living Christ are always seeing life where others see death. The world is not a cold, lifeless, place, but a world with a hope and future. We live and work in the present with that future in mind. We have Easter baskets filled with symbols of new life to celebrate the new life God has given to us through the resurrection of Jesus from the dead!
All glory be to God.