

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe Jesus Rose"
SERMON TEXT: Matthew 28:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 27, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the movie *Bucket List*? That's the 2007 movie with Morgan Freeman and Jack Nicholson. The characters they play are two very different men who meet each other in a hospital room, as they're both being diagnosed with terminal cancer. Before Carter and Edward leave the hospital, they come up with a list of things they want to do before they "kick the bucket." Because their cancer is under control for a while and Edward has lots of money that he's willing to share, the two men are able to sky dive, visit the pyramids in Egypt, and climb part way up Mt. Everest. Early in these adventures, while they're traveling on an airplane, Morgan Freeman's character Carter looks out the window and makes a comment about the beauty God has created. Carter is a man of faith, but Jack Nicholson's character Edward isn't so sure that he believes in God. The rest of the movie is a search, of sorts, for what the men do believe and how they will act on that belief before their lives come to an end.

Since the beginning of January, I've been preaching a sermon series on the centuries-old *Apostles' Creed*. So far in this "I Believe" series, we've talked about what it means to say, I believe in God, I believe in Jesus, and I believe Jesus suffered and died. This series on *The Apostles' Creed* will continue into March, and I hope you'll be here for each installment. Our lives are challenging—and when our world is rocked by health crises, conflicted relationships, uncertainties at work, financial stress, natural disasters, loss and grief, or any number of other threats to our well-being—it's really important for us to have a strong source of hope. That's why, today, I'm inviting you to consider what it means to say, "I believe Jesus rose."

1—CHANGE IN JESUS' PHYSICAL BODY

When we say, "I believe Jesus rose," the first thing we usually think of is a change in Jesus' physical body. The gospels tell us that Jesus was beaten with a whip, hung on a cross, and pierced with

a sword. Jesus' body suffered insurmountable trauma. So, when we are also told that his body lay in a tomb for three days, the point is clear that he was "dead, dead, dead."¹ No one was expecting him to revive. He had breathed his last breath. His life was over. As Jesus said on the cross, it was "finished."

And, yet, the gospels tell us that something more did happen to Jesus' physical body. When the women went to the tomb early on Sunday morning, Jesus' body was gone. Matthew's gospel tells us the women were both afraid and filled with joy as they ran to tell the disciples what they had seen. Along the way, Jesus met them in bodily form sufficient for them to recognize him, clasp his feet, and worship him. Then he was mysteriously gone again until Jesus met up with the disciples on a Galilean mountain some time later.

In Matthew and the other gospels of Mark, Luke, and John, the risen Jesus is described with varying degrees of physicality. Sometimes he was readily identified; other times the disciples weren't so sure it was him. Sometimes they saw angels and a bright light; other times they saw Jesus himself. Sometimes the risen Jesus walked through locked doors as if he were a ghost or a spirit; other times he broke bread or cooked fish. And, while we don't know if Thomas actually did it, we are told that the risen Jesus suggested that Thomas reach out and touch his bodily wounds. All that variety of experience and description gives evidence that it wasn't easy to explain the mystery of the Resurrection. But speak of it they must because the earliest disciples knew that something had changed in Jesus' physical body.

Throughout the centuries since then, Christians and skeptics alike have tried to explain what happened that day. Matthew 28 tells us that the Jewish chief priests and the guards knew that Jesus' body was gone. Needing to explain Jesus' disappearance from the tomb, they immediately devised a story to say that Jesus' disciples had stolen away his body in the middle of the night while the guards were sleeping. When I was in college, I read a book called *The Passover Plot* that was written along that same line, that some kind of deception was afoot. I've even read a comparison of the disappearance of Jesus' body to a phenomena reported in Tibetan Buddhism, where there is supposedly evidence of some

holy men whose bodies mysteriously shrank down to only hair and fingernails within a week or so after their deaths.²

2—CHANGE IN THE DISCIPLES' PERCEPTION

Without video footage of what occurred inside Jesus' tomb, we will probably never know exactly what happened to Jesus' body. But we do know that something physical changed—something significant enough to redirect the disciples from a focus on death to a focus on life, from a belief that Jesus was a crucified victim to the belief that Jesus was a risen Lord. So, when we say, "I believe Jesus rose," we also mean there was a change in the disciples' perception. Whatever difficulties we may have in believing that Jesus' formerly dead body got up from the tomb and walked out, I don't think any of us can doubt that the earliest Christians perceived and believed they were facing a new reality.

Sure, it took them some time to figure it out. Previously, they had left everything to follow Jesus, and now their spiritual leader had died. They had a lot of difficult grief work to do. So, according to Matthew, they left Jerusalem and went home to Galilee, where they could think and heal and wait.

For the convenience of an annual church calendar, we Christians tend to collapse everything about Jesus into a brief period of time. We say he was born in December, baptized as a 30-year-old adult in January, crucified and resurrected in March or April, and ascended to heaven in May or June. All that in five or six months? I don't think so. Likewise, it took the disciples longer to process what happened on Easter morning. That's probably why the letters and gospels of the New Testament weren't written until several decades later.

We're not sure how long it took, but eventually, the disciples did heal and understand. Why? Because the risen Jesus kept appearing to them, even in Galilee. Even while they were fishing. Even at the top of a mountain. Their new perception of Jesus was not as a corpse in a tomb, but as a living, breathing, teaching Lord. Their new perception of Jesus was as a savior who offered forgiveness from sin and guilt, even to those who didn't deserve it. Their new perception of Jesus was as someone who was encouraging them, even commanding them, to get up from their lethargy and get busy doing God's

work. The thinking of the disciples changed from a focus on fear and grief over Jesus' dead body to the joyful realization that God had raised Jesus from the dead.

3—CHANGE IN US

When we say, "I believe Jesus rose," it makes sense that we'd consider what change happened to Jesus' body and what change happened in the perception of those first disciples. But there's a third change we also need to consider. When presented with the Easter story, we need to ask ourselves, what change occurs in us? In other words, when we say, "I believe Jesus rose," do we continue to focus our attention on the dark side of death, or do we allow God to raise us up to the newness of life? When we say, "I believe Jesus rose," do we stay stuck in sadness, anger, guilt, and pain—or do we embrace resurrection hope?

Jesus' death was real. His disciples' grief was real. And our life traumas and challenges are also real. If you have any doubt, ask a federal worker who still has to wait a few more days for a paycheck and is still worried that their livelihood could be put in jeopardy again in three weeks. We human beings face job stress, family conflict, addiction, mental illness, physical pain, temptation, child care or elder care worries—you name it. It's not healthy for us to deny any of that. But it's not healthy, either, for us to get stuck in those places of negativity. We have to rise up. We have to claim life. We have to grab hold of hope. We have to believe that, just as God raised up Jesus, God will raise us up, as well.

Do you remember the horrific tsunami that hit Japan in 2011? Those gigantic waves and the earthquake that caused it killed approximately 20,000 people. A month or so after the event, one report focused on how the tsunami affected the children in a particular city where 10% of the people died. The schools were still closed, and the middle school had been turned into a shelter.

Masako Ito, a woman who was staying at the shelter with her children, explained that the tsunami destroyed her house and the daycare center where she worked. It also killed her husband. Still in the throes of the disaster, Masoko reported, "My middle daughter often has nightmares, saying, 'I dreamed I lost you, too, [Mommy].' I just hold her tight and say, 'I'm not dying. I'm alive. So we're

going to see things and travel. And you're going to take care of me in my old age.'" Masako was thankful for all the relief assistance that had come into her community. But the greater need, she said, was "for people to comfort the children . . . to tell them it's going to be OK."³

Jesus' resurrection is God's way of assuring all us children that we're going to be OK. Of course, that doesn't mean that all our problems are going to disappear, and it doesn't mean that trauma or death will never come again. But the resurrection of Jesus does give us confidence that—whatever happens—God will be with us, and somehow, together, we are going to be alright.

CONCLUSION

In the "Service of Death and Resurrection" printed in the back of our hymnals, there's a prayer I like. The prayer says, "God, . . . help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁴

God comforts us in those words. We may not understand all the physical or spiritual dynamics that took place during and after that first Easter morning. But we can be sure that the risen Christ is with us in our life and our death and our life to come. And, to me, that's the most important meaning of the statement "I believe Jesus rose."

¹David Steindl-Rast, *Deeper than Words: Living the Apostles' Creed* (Doubleday Religion: New York, 2010), pp. 104.

²Steindl-Rast, p. 110f. This "rainbow body" phenomenon is also discussed in many internet articles.

³Yuki Noguchi, "Japan Struggles with How to Heal Children's Hearts," Morning Edition, NPR, April 22, 2011.

⁴*United Methodist Hymnal* (UM Publishing House: Nashville, 1989), p. 871.