

SERMON TITLE: "Resurrection Faith"  
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1-18  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: April 21, 2018 (Easter) at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

The eyes of the world were glued to our TVs as we witnessed Monday's tragic burning of the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris. The depth of sympathy and solidarity stirred by that destructive fire was evidenced by the number of Facebook pictures rapidly posted of people standing in front of Notre Dame while on their vacations. At first, all thoughts were about the terrible loss of such an important edifice that had, for 856 years, served both as a spiritual home to Roman Catholic faithful and as the historic site of many coronations and other civic events. But when French President Emanuel Macron announced that the cathedral would be rebuilt in five years, donations and pledges started pouring in. Now, it seems, the rebuilding of that great cathedral will certainly happen.

A phoenix rising from the ashes is one of the many images of resurrection. Other symbols are the butterfly which seems to come alive from what appears to be a dead cocoon, an Easter lily that sprouts and grows from a bulb that looks dried up and dead, and a hard-shelled egg from which bursts forth a baby bird. All those symbols, of course, remind us of the resurrection images of the empty cross and the empty tomb, now standing as signs of God's victorious resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

The long history of the Cathedral of Notre Dame is impressive, and we Christians can certainly celebrate the sacred relics that were rescued from the flames—like the crown of thorns said by some to have been worn by Jesus on the cross. But far more important than the crown of thorns raised up from the ashes is the resurrection faith that we Christians associate with it. Because this resurrection faith has given hope and comfort for 2000 years to vast populations around the world, I invite you to consider the Easter story with me this morning. As we look at John, chapter 20, let's see how we can develop and find strength in this resurrection faith.

## 1—CRISIS OF FAITH

Resurrection faith often begins with a crisis of faith. The Gospel of John tells us that, early on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb. Once there, Mary discovered that the large stone had been rolled away from the tomb and that Jesus' body was gone. Obviously this would be a terrible compounding of the agony and distress Mary already felt. First her teacher Jesus had been arrested and whipped. Then he was mocked and crucified like a criminal. And now his body had disappeared. Mary Magdalene felt intense grief and distressing hopelessness. All seemed lost.

Most people can relate, at some level, to what Mary was feeling. We, too, have experienced crises in our lives. The death of a spouse or a child often leaves a horrible pain which causes us to question: Why? What? How? Sometimes the crisis is job related: our position is eliminated, our business goes bankrupt, or our boss expects us to do something unethical. Sometimes the crisis is in our family: our spouse cheats on us, our teenager gets hooked on drugs, our parent is abusive, or we have questions about gender identity or sexual orientation. Sometimes the crisis comes from our own health problems: an accident steals our independence, chronic pain interferes with our plans, or an addiction drains us of resources to pursue a normal life.

When crisis comes, do we pull a blanket over our heads and hide? Do we become angry and bitter? Do we find someone to blame? John tells us that Mary did try that approach: "**They** have taken the Lord out of the tomb," she said, "and we don't know where **they** have laid him." The better response to crisis is what Mary also did: she ran to tell others. She hurried to share her pain with Simon Peter and the other disciple. While this act drew Simon Peter and the other disciple into the crisis too, the three of them could better bear the burden of loss together. Together they could do a reality check and work through the confusion. Together they could ponder their next steps.

A couple weeks ago, a water main broke in the street in front of my next-door neighbors' house. A 30' foot geyser of water and gravel pelted their house and the house to their north and sent water and

mud into our yard. I wasn't home, but my husband reported that the emergency brought out all the neighbors into the street to watch in dismay and commiserate with the two households most affected.

Resurrection faith often begins with a crisis that has the potential to draw us together. As people carry each other's burdens and lift each other in prayer, a glimmer of hope begins to emerge from the crisis of faith.

## **2—STIRRINGS OF FAITH**

While resurrection faith may begin with a crisis of faith, the second step is often the stirrings of faith. After hearing Mary's report, Simon Peter and the other disciple ran to the tomb to see if it were truly empty. They could see the linen wrappings lying there where Jesus had just been. Mary's fear that Jesus' body had been taken away seemed to be correct. But the Gospel of John gives us a mixed message here. Verse eight says that the other disciple went in the tomb, saw, and believed. Believed what? That the tomb was empty? That someone had taken Jesus' body? Or that Jesus had been raised from the dead? Surely the disciple had not yet come to that belief—since verse nine says that the disciples didn't yet understand that Jesus must rise from the dead.

We really can't be sure what the disciple believed. All we know is that when he saw the empty tomb, some kind of faith stirred within him. His curiosity and interest were piqued. A seed of faith was planted. Yet, in spite of the stirrings within them, Simon Peter and the other disciple left the tomb before they had complete understanding or faith.

Simon Peter and the other disciple remind me of a lot of people I know. They say they believe, but it's hard to tell what or why. Their "Christian faith" comes too easily, without much study or struggle. Their belief is shallow, without root in scripture or theological understanding. They are like the pilot of a cargo plane, flying in a storm. Blinded by clouds and snow, the pilot was afraid to land. Eventually the plane ran out of gas and crashed. Fortunately, the crew was able to parachute to safety.

Recalling the event later, the pilot described his experience by saying, “I went up an atheist and came down a Methodist.”<sup>1</sup>

If near-death experiences stir up our faith, that’s good. But stirred up just enough to be shallow or confused isn’t especially healthy. I’m always amazed at the Gallup polls which indicate a high percentage of Americans who claim to believe in God, Jesus, and life everlasting—yet only a small percentage of those same persons can name the four gospels. What does that say about our beliefs, if we don’t even know the basic sources of our Christian faith?

Likewise, I’m mystified by those persons who claim to believe in God but see no need to attend worship or Sunday school. That makes about as much sense as saying, “I believe in nutrition, but I don’t need to eat food to stay alive.” We can’t just say we believe and then go on with life as if we don’t. True belief will change the way we behave.

To have our faith stirred is great, but we must grow beyond some of these obvious contradictions. If we remain in shallow belief, we’ll be easily confused. Like Mary, we won’t know the difference between Jesus and a gardener. We’ll be led astray by false teachings which sound good at the moment but have no basis in scripture or Christian tradition. Confusion and shallow beliefs are normal at the start of our Christian walk. The trick is not to get stuck there.

### **3—RESURRECTION FAITH**

Fortunately, the Easter story didn’t stop when Peter and the other disciple left the tomb. It didn’t even stop when Mary thought she saw the gardener. Mary had experienced the crisis of faith and the stirrings of faith. But now she needed to move on to the deeper level of resurrection faith, and that became possible for her when Jesus called Mary by name. She had persisted long enough, and searched for Jesus diligently enough, that Mary finally heard Jesus speaking to her. When Jesus spoke to Mary in a personal way, she recognized his voice and was sure that he was her rabbi and Lord.

The essence of resurrection faith is when belief comes not only to the eyes and the ears, but also to the heart. There's an Irish proverb which says, "Seeing is believing—but *feeling* is God's own truth."<sup>2</sup> What convinced Mary wasn't some kind of scientific or tangible fact. It was Mary's heart-felt personal relationship with the risen Christ that enabled her to come to resurrection faith.

Bible scholars agree that the earliest biblical accounts of Jesus' resurrection were those of the Apostle Paul, as found in his First Letter to the Corinthians. It's noteworthy, though, that Paul never mentions the empty tomb. To him, that fact is unnecessary, and—as one theologian says—"It hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing . . . In the last analysis, what convinced the people that [Jesus] had risen from the dead was not the absence of his corpse but his living presence."<sup>3</sup>

The most convincing proof of Jesus' resurrection is his personal presence with us every day. Carl Jung, a famous psychoanalyst, was once interviewed by the British Broadcasting Company. Jung was asked whether or not he believed in God. Jung's immediate response was, "I don't need to believe." Then Jung went on to explain, "I [can]not say I believe, [because] I know! I have had the experience of being gripped by something that is stronger than myself, something people call God."<sup>4</sup> For those of us who are Christians, that experience of God comes to us in and through the heart-felt presence of our resurrected Lord Jesus.

### **CONCLUSION**

The refrain of one of my favorite Easter hymns goes like this:

He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today!  
 He walks with me and talks with me  
 along life's narrow way.  
 He lives, he lives, salvation to impart!  
 You ask me how I know he lives?  
 He lives within my heart.<sup>5</sup>

We may begin with a crisis of faith and move on to the stirrings of faith. But when we have a personal relationship with the risen Christ, then we will truly know he lives. Then we will have the hope and strength of resurrection faith.

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *Sourcebook of Wit and Wisdom* (Communications Resources: Canton, OH, 1996), p. 176.

<sup>2</sup>*SWW*, p. 164.

<sup>3</sup>Fred Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*, quoted in *Homiletics* (Jan-Mar 97), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>*SWW*, pp. 161 and 185.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred H. Ackley, "He Lives," 1933.