

SERMON TITLE: "Resurrection Faith"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 17, 2022 (Easter) at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

On Thursday, I read a news article about some Russian citizens who have been punished for speaking out against the war in Ukraine. Those who have tried to raise public awareness have been subjected to arrest, detention, and fines. The Russian government has been trying to suppress and contain any messages other than their official version of events. Like the ancient authorities tried to silence Jesus by crucifying him and sealing him in a tomb, the Putin administration is hoping to lock up and close off any communications of peace and sympathy toward the Ukrainians.

One of the persons the Putin government tried to silence was a Russian Orthodox priest who spoke to his tiny congregation "about the pain he felt over people" dying in Ukraine. Somehow the authorities found out, and they fined him 35,000 rubles. The officials hoped that this punishment would silence the priest's message. Ironically, however, the news of his maltreatment has instead "spread his message far beyond the dozen or so people who initially heard his sermon . . . 'It's impossible to call it anything other than the providence of God,'" the priest reported. Because of the government's reaction, "'The words that I said reached a much larger number of people.'"¹

Like Jesus on Easter morning, the truth can't be contained. Over and over again, God always finds a way to open the grave and restore life. It certainly isn't easy to see in the midst of bombing and crucifixion. In the days and hours before the stone is rolled away from the tomb, a period of trauma and doubt is understandable. There will be a time of grieving and despair. There may be an interval in which it seems like God is not present or listening. For a while, it may even seem like the powers of darkness and evil are winning the battle. But, deep inside that dark tomb, God is at work, preparing a miracle.

On this Easter morning, I invite you to look with me at the story in John 20. Like Jesus' first followers, let's see how we today can find assurance and 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 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. Over these past two years of COVID, many found their jobs too difficult or unsafe. Sometimes the crisis is in our family. Our spouse cheats on us, our teenager starts using drugs, our parent needs more care, or our brother-in-law is an alcoholic. Sometimes the crisis comes from our own health problems. An accident steals our independence, chronic pain interferes with our plans, addiction drains us of resources to pursue a normal life, or dementia and other processes of aging limit what we can do.

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.

In the United Methodist News this week, I read a report about how United Methodists in Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary have been helping Ukrainian refugees with food, shelter, education, transportation, and hygiene. We can be very proud of those front line volunteers, but we can also be proud that we are supporting them through the collection of \$1740 that our congregation just sent to the United Methodist Committee on Relief. Resurrection faith draws us together. As we carry one another's burdens and lift each other in prayer, a glimmer of hope begins to emerge, even 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 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 began stirring within him. His curiosity and interest were piqued. A seed of faith was planted. Simon Peter and the other disciple left the tomb before they had resolved their doubts, but the stirrings of faith would lead them to greater understanding.

Resurrection faith, or any Christian faith for that matter, is a process of growing and developing. No one understands it all at first. Even those who have been attending worship and Sunday school since

they were babies don't know everything yet about God's mysterious and miraculous ways. One of the wonders and beauties of resurrection faith is that there is always room for doubt, questions, and curiosity, because there is always more for us to learn.

A couple weeks ago, there was a science story in the news that caught my attention. Physicists who study subatomic particles were talking about an experiment that indicated that a type of boson particle was more massive than they expected. Since we're talking about subatomic particles—which are smaller than molecules, atoms, electrons, protons, and neutrons—the weight increase was really, really tiny. But, since subatomic particles make up everything, if that increased measurement would hold up in repeated experiments, then this would be a very big deal. Scientists would have to change their “standard model” of how they understand and explain the cosmos and everything in it.

This story caught my attention because I can remember when news of the boson particle came out in 2012, and it was hailed as “the God particle” because it was so helpful in explaining everything that exists. If this boson weight gain turns out to be correct, however, then God will have some new explaining to do. But, in a way, that's to be expected. As one particle physicist has said, “Quantum mechanics is really beautiful and weird. Anyone who has not been deeply troubled by quantum mechanics has not understood it.”² In other words, there's still a lot to learn about God particles and everything else in God's weirdly miraculous creation, and that's why resurrection faith includes lots of doubts and questions that arise in our not-yet-certain stirrings of faith.

3—RESURRECTION FAITH IS PERSONAL

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, ears, and brain, but also to the heart. There's an Irish proverb which says, "Seeing is believing—but feeling is God's own truth."³ 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 an 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."⁴

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 could 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."⁵ For those of us who are Christians, that experience of God comes to us in and through the very personal 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.⁶

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

¹https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-europe-moscow-347cf5d867eb34b1e8469f942685b673?user_email=f5458d9d387dc36677aa4744e4728326d27aa283f58244466f5746f59de0e3ef&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=April14_Russia_Ukraine&utm_term=Morning%20Wire%20Subscribers . AP, 4/14/22.

²<https://apnews.com/article/science-physics-ae5eafd6a2e48f88f940e37b30e76d96> . By Seth Borenstein, AP, 4/7/22.

³*Sourcebook for Wit and Wisdom* (Communications Resources: Canton, OH, 1996), p. 164.

⁴Fred Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus*, quoted in *Homiletics* (Jan-Mar 1997), p. 55.

⁵*SWW*, pp. 161 and 185.

⁶Alfred H. Ackley, "He Lives," 1933.