

**April 23, 2017 at Advent Lutheran Church in Cedarburg, Wisconsin. Second Sunday of Easter. John 20:19-31. "As the Father has sent me I send you." Doubting Thomas again as the "transition" between seeing, and believing.**

**Question: What really happened to Jesus on Easter morning?**

***(Telephone game: I believe in the sun even when it is not shining)***

Historically speaking, the earliest reference to the **Resurrection of Jesus** is found in **Saint Paul's letters** to the early gatherings of people that we call the early church. The **Book of Acts** and the **letters of Paul** are older than the Gospels. Paul makes no mention of the **birth of Christ**, nor does he mention an **empty tomb**. But as Presbyterian pastor and author **Frederick Buechner** writes,

**"But the fact of the matter is that in a way it hardly matters how the body of Jesus came to be missing because in the last analysis what convinced the people that he had risen from the dead was *not* the absence of his corpse but his *living presence*. And so it has been ever since."**

You often hear me talk about how the Bible has been translated hundreds if not thousands of times over a period of two thousand years, first as oral transmission, that is telling the stories repeatedly, meaning that significant change is not only expected but assured. As we know from that little telephone game most of us played as children, even a small gathering of people will distort or change altogether a message we whisper to each other.

And you also know that I believe, that the importance of the stories and events in the Bible are not meant to be understood as a mere reporting of facts, but rather are charged with deep and timeless meaning, and the spiritual power to affect the way we live our lives.

That is certainly why we call it the **"living word of God,"** and not something else. Some people will suggest that the words of Jesus are **immortal** like the plays of **Shakespeare**, and that the **resurrection** means that our loved ones live on after death in our **memory**. But I find that a **weak** and for me an unacceptable explanation.

Simply **remembering** something is just that, **remembering**. Whatever happened on that first Easter was something else, something that had never happened

before in human history. It was so powerful and unusual that it is not even described. **There were no witnesses to the resurrection.** There are no written descriptions. **We are given no explanations.** Oh, I certainly know that artists have painted thousands of pictures over the year depicting the life of Jesus including his appearances after the resurrection – but not one drawing or painting exists of **“how”** it happened...because no one knows!

I absolutely love the final scene in **Franco Zeffirelli’s** 1977 film *Jesus of Nazareth* when the character named **Zerah** enters the empty tomb, sees the burial cloth lying on the empty slab that held the now missing body of Jesus, and with tremendous wisdom speaks the words that have changed human history forever;

***“Now it begins, now it all begins.”***

In that one moment, and in those few words **Zerah** captures the reality of the Resurrection, and no stories, no analysis, no proof texts, nothing else is needed except what is proclaimed as fact.

***Christ is risen!***

I believe we would do well to embrace this mystery as something way beyond fact as we usually use that term. The truth is, we just don’t know how it happened, and the truth is also that it **does not matter.** There are many things that are true and we don’t know how they happen.

My refrigerator note for today was prompted by the annually re-occurring Gospel text for today where Thomas is wrongfully vilified as being a doubter. As if doubt is a bad thing. Doubt is a wonderful thing because it causes us to think more deeply about something that does not seem quite right.

When we doubt, we are driven **to investigate** that which seems not quite right, not quite true.

Virtually every technological advancement in science and medicine has been born out of doubt. The **Wright brothers doubted** that man was destined to be grounded and decided that we should fly like he birds. Today millions upon millions of people fly on a regular basis circling the globe!

When **Bill Gates** worked for IBM and suggested that a PC or personal computer be developed IBM answered there would be no market for something like that. Thank God **Bill Gates** doubted that and left IBM.

Telephones, radios, televisions, computers, all were born because someone **doubted** when told that “**it can’t be done!**” When the Russians launched Sputnik into space proving to the doubters of eventually being able to orbit the earth and return because “**it can’t be done,**” President **John F. Kennedy** announced before a special joint session of Congress the dramatic and ambitious goal of sending an American safely to the Moon before the end of the decade.

That was on May 25, 1961. On July 20, 1969 **Neil Armstrong** and **Buzz Aldrin** became the first human beings to set foot on the Lunar surface.

Doubt also has a downside. Although motivated by the same kind of emotion, that is disbelief, this kind gives rise to conspiracy theories. There are websites that record with photographs and data “**proving**” according to them that the moon landing was really staged in Hollywood to fool the world in thinking that the United States beat the Russians to the moon.

After **9/11**, any number of sites popped up saying that videos of the hijacked planes were somehow faked as in animation films even though thousands of New Yorkers saw the planes with their own eyes. Other theories claim that the U.S. demolished the **World Trade Center** in order to blame the terrorist so that we would have a reason to go to war against them.

One of the most outlandish and certainly most **offensive** conspiracy theories about which **so-called historians** and **experts** have written is the claim that the Holocaust never happened, and that it is all just Jewish propaganda.

And even worse being that grieving parents and loved ones should have to listen to someone like radio talk show host **Alex Jones**, who claims that the **Sandy Hook Massacre** that took the lives of 20 children and 6 adults never happened and that it was made up by left wing liberals wanting to restrict gun rights in America.

I am personally convinced that Jesus, knowing how the human mind works and how doubt can swing both ways, from advancing science and making life better for all of us can also cause the kind of blindness to reality that I mention today – said to Thomas;

**“Do not doubt but believe.”**

The resurrection of Christ is not something that you **prove** or **disprove**, it is something you **believe**. Once again, as is often the case with scripture the writer of this Gospel lesson explains why he wrote it in the first place.

Not to report an event as much as to explain that faith is not a question of proof, but an open door to the fullness of life.

**“Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.”**

**Zerah was right after all...it did begin in an empty tomb...and still it continues...**

**AMEN.**