

April 12, 2020
Easter Sunday

First Presbyterian Church
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Rev. Jim Widboom

“The Barn is Clean”

John 20:24, 25; Acts 2:14-16; Acts 2:32-36; Acts 2:43-47; John 20:21

Part I, Doubt

Easter is more than a happy ending to a sad story. **Christian faith hinges on our belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.** And in seeking faith in the risen Christ, we must not be upset with ourselves if we doubt. The disciple Thomas is famously known as the one who would not believe unless he had good evidence. But Thomas is also the first disciple named in the resurrection story in John, and his reluctance to believe is not a shortcoming, I believe, but tells us something very important about faith: doubt is not something one is to be ashamed of, or reluctant to admit. It was present from the very beginning in the very first Christian community. And is the first question addressed by the gospel writer.

We are given freedom to be honest here. Some doubted. To say we haven't doubted is probably to be dishonest, or to not have really thought about it. Believing is not a reluctant cognitive assent against all evidence. **Belief in God's raising of Jesus is more like getting on a fast horse and starting to run. Doubt doesn't go away, it actually keeps the horse running. You need to begin to live out faith in the risen Christ in order to believe it.**

Belief in the resurrection of Jesus is a mysterious working of God in our lives that begins to change our thinking, feeling and living, and doubt is part of it. We must stay honest with the baffling nature of resurrection faith. This is a huge pill for our secular, scientific world to swallow. But let not doubt keep us from exploring its meaning and hold us back from embracing this remarkable witness and good news.

Part II, Dystopic

The crucifixion and death of Jesus remains a sad story, but God has vindicated and redeemed the suffering and death of Jesus. **Vindicate and redeem** are two classic, biblical words that describe the action of God. This is the action of God on Easter.

I had a very good friend at the Rochester Psychiatric Hospital. His name is Bob Riley, director of volunteers. Now and then we stopped in the hall and had long, interesting conversations. One day he told me about a book he was reading, I asked, “is it dystopic?” “What!” he said.

“Yes, dystopic, a new genre, stories about the failure of civilization. They are proliferating.” After that, Bob and I began to make a list of all books and films that we felt were dystopic.

In this lockdown time, you have to be careful what you watch on Netflix because you may get overwhelmed by all these sad stories that seem to have nothing redemptive or hopeful in them but show only how unpleasant and mean human beings can be to each other.

The crucifixion of Jesus remains dystopic, an old sad genre, but **God has acted to end all the sad stories of our world** and has made the crucifixion of Jesus Christ life giving, life changing, a means of healing, a way to find wholeness, and a story of the forgiveness of sins for the whole world.

If you are a fan of J.S. Bach, and his St. Matthew's passion, you must ask, “why does this huge musical lament, make you weep, but feel healed and whole, also?” Bach musically and with texts integrated belief in the resurrection of Jesus in this passion music. If you entertain, even a little, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ begins to save you.

My dean in seminary, Dr. Leander Keck, wrote a book on preaching, and identified two ways to preach. One he called “a hermeneutic of alienation,” where we identify in our preaching how broken the world is. The other he called “a hermeneutic of hope,” where hope becomes the lenses with which we see the world. The dean said preachers are better at seeing alienation, than seeing hope in our preaching! It was a strong push back. Preachers need to move away from the dystopic!

One of the contemporary creeds of the Presbyterian Church speaks about our “broken and fearful world.” Yes, it is broken and fearful, but today we celebrate another reality thrown into the world, that redeems and changes and makes hopeful this broken and fearful world.

The barn is clean. You don't need to go back in there anymore and clean it. The debt of the farmer is tough, but can look different with Easter faith. The wrenching loss of work without money to pay bills is awful, but can look different with Easter faith and is addressed differently with optimistic determination to help those who need it. God's resurrection of Jesus walks us away from a dystopic view of the world, with faith that the world is being redeemed with hearts and hands filled with hope.

Part III, Easter Faith in the New Testament

If you begin to examine the NT, you see how it is filled with resurrection faith. John's resurrection story sees God as a sending God, (John 20:21) sending apostles and disciples into the world to love the world as Jesus loved it. This profound missionary impulse of the early church and through the centuries, to Africa, Scandinavia, the British Isles, to Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, where did it come from? Why leave home and go so far away to do the will of God with this quiet belief that nothing else seems more important. Why did that happen?

The apostle Peter's first public sermon in Acts of the Apostles (2:14-36) declares that God has now made Jesus Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). The earliest confession of the church is **Jesus is Lord**. The early church said courageously and publicly that power and authority in the world now belonged to Jesus Christ. Instead of **Caesar is Lord**, they said, **Jesus is Lord**, and began to live as if it were true.

A new community gathered around the witness of the risen Christ, selling possessions, making sure everyone had what they needed, gathering together, breaking bread, studying the teachings of the apostles, praying (Acts 2:43-47), communities of love, not an ideal but a reality. The examples go on. The NT is built around and written with Easter eyes. No dystopic story.

Part IV, Easter Faith at FPC, Pittsford

Easter faith needs nurturing. The enthusiasm of Easter faith declines quickly, so we must pay attention. My fireplace has saved me this winter. When Jan and I moved into our town house I thought the fire place was fake. I checked it out, called a chimney cleaner, he came and said, "this fire place has never been used, it doesn't need cleaning." I couldn't believe it. I tracked down firewood and now start a fire almost every night. My goal is to get a bed of red-hot coals, once you have that, you can put a big log on the fire and it will burn. Without the bed of red-hot coals, the fire dies quickly.

The early church worshiped on Sunday because every Sunday, the first day of the week, was a celebration of the resurrection of Jesus. How do we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus every Sunday? How do we create and keep alive a red-hot bed of coals that gives life to our community and sends us out in deeds of perplexing and extraordinary kindness?

The following are examples of faith and witness, I have seen here at FPC that keeps the fire of Easter faith burning.

...The reverent silence of the congregation following a prayer of confession in worship, remembering the grace, mercy, and lordship of Jesus Christ. It is a silence that speaks faith to me.

...When anyone stands in the congregation and looks straight on, and states single-mindedly of kindness shown on a mission trip to a place far away, and we remember the peculiar sending of God, with a compulsion we don't quite understand.

...When a teenager sings out a melody of faith and love for Jesus during Youth Sunday.

...When the congregation silently without fanfare, contributes generously to an international offering that assists persons and ministries around the world.

...When inexplicably a disagreement, a hurt, an insult is forgotten, released and friendships are restored.

...When a new pastor accepts the call to serve the congregation, affirming the faithful work of the Pastoral Nominating Committee, growing a patient trust in the leading and providence of the risen Lord.

These examples and many, many more are clearly evident in the life and ministry of this congregation. It is this witness and faith which keeps the church relevant and necessary in our broken and fearful world.

In January I asked in our newsletter, who is the most important stakeholder in the life and ministry of the congregation? My answer, it is the risen Christ. The ministry of Jesus Christ is the most important stakeholder in FPC, Pittsford, that must lead, and to which we must give our very best.