

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

***The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!***

What a joyous greeting! What a wonderful day! Generations of Christians have greeted one another in this way. All over the earth this morning the shout goes up, “Christ is risen!”

This is the heart of Christianity. Some have said that the resurrection doesn’t really matter, that we can still be ethical persons and that is what being a Christian is all about. That is not my understanding of Christianity! I’m sure we all know many good and wonderful and ethical people who are Jews or Hindus or Buddhists – and I do not want to discount the sincerity of their beliefs or that God can be found in cultures other than our own. But my point is this: Christianity is more than ethics or morality.

Easter is *the* Holy Day of Christians. It is only celebrated *by* Christians. Christmas has been sort of shared in our culture with other religions.... I’ve even heard of Hanukkah trees! But Easter is different. In spite of the attempted commercialization, the buying of new clothes, the Easter Bunny, and peeps. . . that part of Easter just doesn’t come off. Easter egg hunts are a poor substitute for the Christmas tree, even though a church near us is set to drop 10,000 Easter eggs from a helicopter later today! But you don’t celebrate Easter at home or with a cocktail party. You celebrate Easter at church with fellow believers.

We celebrate Easter because of something which is unique to our heritage. How different the death of Jesus looks alongside the deaths of the founders of other great religions. Buddha died at the age of eighty, at peace, surrounded by his disciples. Confucius died in old age editing the ancient writings of the Chinese people. Mohammed died as the ruler of Arabia, in his harem in the arms of his favorite wife.

Jesus died tortured and insulted, not after a long and fruitful life, but in his early thirties. He died accused as a criminal among criminals. He died accused of being a blasphemer.

And only the followers of Jesus believe that he was raised from the dead. They believe it. It is about *believing*, not *proving*. The Christian faith is just that: faith. It is a

response to an experience, the experience of Christ living within the heart of the believer. It is faith not based on rationality, but on lives which for 2,000 years have been changed by one who was dead and is now alive. A faith based not on understanding, but trust.

I'm going to tell you something you might think morbid this morning. And, trust me, I hope I'm talking about something that will occur years from now, not next week. I want to talk to you about what I *hope* happens at my funeral. I have left instructions that say quite firmly that I don't want a eulogy, but a sermon, at my funeral. I tell the Celebrant, whoever he or she may end up being, "Just preach the Gospel, the Good News, to those gathered." They don't need to hear my story. If they're at my funeral, they already know it and don't need it repeated. No, at my funeral, preach resurrection truth – resurrection Gospel!

I've heard it said that the resurrection means that the spirit of Jesus is undying, that he himself lives on among us, in the way that Socrates does, for instance, in the good that he left behind him, in the lives of all who follow his great example. That's not the language of the Gospels, however. The Gospels describe the resurrection of Jesus far differently.

Fred Buechner makes the argument that there really *is* no story about the resurrection in the New Testament. Except in a very sparse way, it is not *described* at all. There is no poetry about it. It is simply *proclaimed* as fact.

There will always be attempts to rationalize the resurrection. There will always be efforts to make the resurrection intellectually respectable. They will fail. The resurrection is to be *proclaimed*, not *explained*.

When Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women return from the tomb to tell the apostles of their encounter with the two men in dazzling clothes and that Jesus had been raised, they do not try to explain what had occurred. What they do is *announce* it. They *had* no explanation; they had a *proclamation*. Breathlessly, they tell the disciples that Jesus is somehow alive, when they all knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that he was as dead as could be on Friday. And when the disciples heard that news, they reacted as you and I would: it's an "idle tale." It is *only* when they encounter the Risen Lord *for themselves* that *all* of them come to deep faith.

Make no mistake about it: our Christian faith stands or falls on the Resurrection. As St. Paul said, "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ Jesus has been raised from the dead..."

It comes down to this for me. I do not "understand" the Resurrection. But think of this: I do not "understand" love either. How do you "prove" love? You don't. You love. It is that simple, and that profound. You *experience* it. You do not understand it or prove it. The same is true of the Resurrection.

So let us who have *experienced* the love of God, who have *experienced* the Risen Lord who is our Way, our Truth, our Life, give thanks and rejoice on this Holy Day.

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