

Only Love Believes

Friday, myself and three other pastors led what we call the “Procession of the Cross” as we walked through Luke’s gospel’s narration of the last day of Jesus’ life, we read and listened to those events which spoke of darkness and grief, of a burial in a loaned, unused tomb. Yet however we commemorate and honor those events we can never truly capture the darkness of that moment felt by those who lived it—because for over two thousand years we have been proclaiming and celebrating that the darkness did not win. We proclaim that God fulfilled God’s own promise of redemption for the world, just not in the way those there expected. But really—how could that have been what they expected? Of course, from our vantage point we know that Jesus had told them what was to happen. Of course from our vantage point we say, “How could they not have understood what Jesus told them and believed.” Yet, do we really believe in the news given us by the empty tomb? How and why do we come to believe, if we do. Each time we gather we affirm certain things about what we believe, things we believe are based on the “new thing” God was doing to reconcile humanity to the ways of the kingdom. This “new” thing was proclaimed by Isaiah long before Jesus of Nazareth was born. The faith we proclaim includes several things: we confess that Jesus is Lord because we are not our own but belong to God. In faith we embrace the concept that God is working to bring life and love and peace and justice to all things and all people. In the face of the tragic suffering in our world, we proclaim that God is faithful and merciful. We trust ourselves to our compassionate God believing God is transforming us from within; thereby making us new in the process of making “all things new.” Today we celebrate another essential thing we affirm: we affirm that we consciously have decided to follow a man convicted to death, who was executed over two thousand years ago. We also believe that living and witnessing to this faith means we too must carry the cross. If you ask most people who profess this faith why they are embracing this face, most will probably answer: “so that I can get to heaven when I die!” or “so that I will have eternal life.” But somehow this answer falls short of how we are called to respond to the gift of faith. There is nothing wrong with hoping for eternal life, or for going to heaven, whatever image of that forms in your mind. But that approach makes “getting into heaven” the goal of Christian discipleship as a response to God’s grace. One commentator said that turns God into a kind of kiosk operator who is handing out tickets to “the greatest show not on earth.” In short, this view misses the point of the good news that our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ gave us. From the biblical perspective, our faith is about the hope that the power to raise one individual who was imprisoned by death is a power that can transform everything and everyone. The good news of Easter does create for each of us a renewed experience of God’s love. Yet that is only the beginning of what God was and is up to in this world, not the end of the story. We hold this faith in the assurance that if death could not stop God, then nothing can. The point of Christian faith is what Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls God’s “dream”; the dream that God wants to see fulfilled where God’s ways of love and justice prevail. It is a dream of a whole new world where all people and even all nature are filled with God’s love, God’s freedom, God’s joy, and God’s peace. While that may be a dream we find it hard to imagine, while it may seem like too much “pie in the sky” when we view our broken world, the fact that our faith in the risen Christ “calls us to hope for more than we have yet seen or experienced. If we stop trying to get that ticket, we can seek to explore that vision which is God’s dream. Then we can let it

captivate our hearts and minds and inspire us to seek “first God’s kingdom and justice” in this world, right here and now. When we proclaim that Jesus Christ was raised from death we proclaim that we believe in God’s vision, that God is working to create a new world where God’s reign is present—we say we believe what Jesus taught, that God’s reign is near to us. This resurrection news we proclaim, not just at Easter but every Sunday, transformed the world. It is still transforming the world for those who believe. What we proclaim is not just an empty tomb, but a transformed world which is only explicable on the basis that something really happened which was witnessed by people which transformed their existing world views to a breaking point. And for us this event has the power to transform our lives, impossible as the event seems to us. And if it’s not hard to truly believe, you are probably not paying attention! One of the common elements of all the resurrection stories across the gospels is that no one expects the resurrection. Even though Jesus predicted both his death and resurrection—actually several times during his ministry—no one greets the news that God has indeed raised Jesus from the grave, defeating both death and the devil by saying, “Praise God!” No one shouts “Hallelujah” when they hear that the tomb is empty. No one in the narrative begins celebrating at first when they hear their friend and Lord has been raised to life. Early in the morning Luke tells us the women who have watch the body being laid to rest come with the spices they have prepared for anointing Jesus body. They find the stone rolled away when they enter and find no body they are perplexed about it. They have no expectation that Jesus has been raised and so are terrified and bow their faces to the ground when suddenly they find they are not alone. Instead they are confronted by two men in dazzling clothes. Dazzling clothes—that is the same description given about clothes worn in the record of the transfiguration. These men ask the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the son of man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” In Luke this reminder causes the women to indeed remember, so they go back and find the rest of the disciples with this news. However, their acceptance of the reminder and its meaning is met with skepticism by the rest of the disciples. The women’s report is considered “an idle tale” and was not believed. Being reminded of Jesus’ words did not give them belief. The Greek actually is not as charitable if translated literally. A more precise translation indicates the disciples thought the women crazy; nuts; spouting utter nonsense. This report makes the claim God entered the stage of human history in order to create an entirely new reality all together. If you think about it, that reality could be frightening. If the dead don’t remain dead, what can you count on? If you think about resurrection that way, it breaks all the rules. That rule which was a known predictable quantity which in a sense is comforting. Resurrection upsets all that. It turns the neat and orderly into the unknown and unpredictable. Which is why I would offer that if you don’t find resurrection at least a little hard to believe you probably aren’t taking it very seriously; you aren’t really looking at the change in scope that the event brings because if you think about it, because of the promise within it is huge. And when it sinks in and becomes real to you, absolutely everything looks a little different. Those contemporaries of Jesus struggle to believe because they recognize the incredible scope and titanic implications of the biblical witness that when God raised Jesus from the dead God was creating a new reality; overthrowing death, sin, and all that would oppress us; God was declaring once and for all that life is more powerful than death and love more enduring than tragedy. Many of us simply

accept the resurrection as part of our faith, but doing so does not allow the reality and wonder of God's activity in the resurrection to break in upon us in a new way. Resurrection faith came slowly to most of the disciples. But when it came it changed everything. Jesus' resurrection as a reality happened in this physical world. When we think of that word in the 21st century we see two aspects: the scientific and the historical. Those things that are scientific are those things that are repeatable, demonstrable and thereby become "believable", because they can be shown. Those things that are historical are not like that. As much as we may say history repeats itself that is only true in a very general sense—humankind continues to go to war, continues to seek self over others, etc. Yet specific historical events happen only once—there was One WWI, a very different war than WWII. There was one first landing on the moon; historically Caesar only crossed the Rubicon once, the fall of the 2nd Temple in Jerusalem was a one-time happening of 70 AD. So trying to say that Jesus' resurrection did not happen as the biblical witness gives us doesn't work. We can't just say that "sort of thing" doesn't actually happen because it hasn't kept occurring. That is applying a scientific lens to a one time historical event. History is full of events that have happened only once. So when we receive the biblical report how do we understand it? Faith in Jesus' rising from the dead transcends but also includes what we call history, and science, for that matter. Faith of this sort is not blind belief which rejects all history and science. Nor is it simply a belief which inhabits a totally different sphere, discontinuous from either and put in a separate watertight compartment. This belief in Jesus' resurrection is faith in the creator God who has promised to put all things to rights at the last, the God who has raised Jesus has done so within history, leaving us evidence that demands an explanation. The reality which is the resurrection cannot be "known" from within the old world of decay and denial, of tyrants and torture, of disobedience and death. It is the defining event of the new creation which God set in motion with the birth of Jesus. If we are even to get a glimpse of this new world, let alone enter it, we need a different kind of "knowing" than we usually have. A "knowing" which will involve us in new ways, a world view about how things work which draws out from us not just the cool appraisal of detached quasi-historical or scientific research and archeology, but instead a whole-person engagement with the one who rose. The best shorthand for this engagement is "love." When in John's gospel recording of a post resurrection between the risen Jesus and Peter who had denied him; Jesus' repeated question to Peter is: "Do you love me?" That is Jesus' question for us. There is a whole world of things within that question. It is invitation and challenge; it is the way of becoming that "new" creation. It is the invitation and challenge of seeing God's work and desire to re-create our world as we are invited to be a part of how that happens. Because when Peter affirmed that he did indeed love Jesus, Jesus told him to feed and tend his sheep. That is how God is at work in our lives and world: through the Love God gives to us which calls forth our love and faith; transform us to those who work to bring God's dream into the present world where we live. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.