

Easter 2008

St. John's Parish
Clayton, CA

Sermon preached by Pastor Jim Stickney

Note: I preached slightly different sermons at the three Easter services. What follows is a selection of theological exhortation and illustrations from those sermons.

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

I have a favorite cartoon: a sketch of a man standing outside the church, telling the preacher, "You know, Padre, you're really stuck in a rut in your preaching. I come here every Easter, and the sermon is always on the Resurrection!" Maybe I'm stuck in a rut, because every Easter I refer to the same old cartoon!

Christ did not die and rise from the dead only to make bad people into good people. Christ died and rose to make dying people truly alive!

When I was about ten, I caught a bad cold just before Easter. Mom and Dad debated, then decided I was old enough that they could just leave me home alone while they and the younger children went to church that Easter morning. As an incentive, they gave me my Easter basket early before they left. I remember feeling, not sick and abandoned, but happy that they trusted me. I had a fine time alone on Easter, eating some candy, and finding a license plate in my basket with "Jim" on it which I taped to my bicycle before they returned. Most of all, I remember feeling that God was with me in my heart, even though I wasn't in church. Not going to church that day helped me find God. God took what could have been sadness for me, and transformed it.

I've spent a few decades making up for my absentee status that Easter morning, and I don't tell this story to encourage you to stay home next Easter! My point is that the presence of Christ can never be limited to one location. Precisely because Jesus died and rose, Christ can be experienced anywhere.

The faithful women of the Gospel story were sneaking past the scrutiny of the executioners and the collaborators. They weren't looking for new life: they just wanted to follow through and anoint the body of Jesus properly. We imagine that they were overjoyed immediately at the news that Jesus was risen, but that meant these women had to give up their plan, and go look for Jesus. Was it difficult for them to open their hearts again to the love they felt for Jesus? Is it

difficult for us to break out of the tomb of our fond pleasant memories, and look around at the changed circumstances of our life today, and find Jesus there?

Are some of you trying to paste last years leaves on the tree and then call it Spring? Instead, look at your life this day! This *moment* Christ Jesus wants to live in you! The new life just won't be the same as the old life — God intends to do a **new thing**.

Two facts emerge from the various accounts of the Resurrection. No one saw Jesus rise, yet everyone experienced his presence in surprising ways from that day on. If the Gospels were written to deceive, wouldn't they at least have one person claiming to have been there to witness the moment of Christ Jesus rising from the dead?

These surface contradictions bother some people, who then try to smooth them out. But witnesses to the same event usually provide contradictory accounts. When there's been an accident, people are clear about the most important thing: some blue van collided with the white sedan, and everyone walked away. Accounts may differ as to who missed the signal, what clothes people were wearing, who made the first cell phone call, and who said exactly what words when. One angel or two? or a man in a white robe? How many women went first? When did the men get there? Did Jesus look so different, like a gardener?

John Polkinhorne is an English scientist and theologian who has worked to unify and explore common ground in what appear to some to be unrelated fields. Here's what John Polkinhorne has to say about Easter:

“If there are such things as miracles, they are rare, one-off events, which is exactly the sort of thing that science isn't set up to talk about. So the problem of miracles is a theological problem. It's a question of divine consistency. God is not condemned never to do anything different, but when God does something different it must be done in a consonant, fitting relationship to things God has done before. Therefore I think the easiest Christian miracle to believe in now is the resurrection of Jesus. If you believe that God was doing a new thing in Jesus, then it's appropriate that a new activity accompany that act.”

Here's my view of it: no one doctored all these different stories to make it consistent. There was no conspiracy to suppress surface contradictions. What's consistent? These things: a massive tomb stone boulder was rolled back, the tomb was empty, and everyone had a spiritual experience that *Jesus was present in a new way!* That's the key for us 2,000 years later: Jesus can be present *for us* in a new way. No — the Scriptures are not trying to mislead us about Jesus' resurrection. It was difficult for the first followers of Jesus to accept, so why

should we be harsh with ourselves in our moments of doubt? Doubt and faith are dialogue agents.

Perhaps you've heard a story called "Footsteps," which goes something like this: A man looks back on the path he's walked through his long long life, and sees two pairs of footprints there. He says, "Lord, I see you were with me there." But then he sees some stretches of the path with only one sets of footprints. When he asks why, the answer comes back, "Well, you said you wanted to be alone so you could feel sorry for yourself about how much better things used to be. I found your self-pity was becoming unbearable, so I left to join some children who were running with happy feet around some unconscious labyrinth path. I kept an eye on you, and when I saw you had snapped out of it, I came back to you. That's why you see, sometimes, two sets of footprints, and sometimes one."

Well, maybe that's not the version of the story you heard. I admit I made it up. The other version of the story was also made up by someone else. Neither really happened — take whatever version you need to walk Truth's path. Christ Jesus did not rise from the dead just to keep things normal for us!

When we celebrate Baptisms, if you listen closely to the words we use, you'll hear a surprising amount of talk about sharing in Christ's death. We are to claim, in Baptism, a symbolic sharing in Christ's death and new life. "*Where's there's death, there's hope.*" That's how a Christian puts it! "*Where's there's death, there's hope.*"

In Baptism, the Church shows us how to die, and thereby enter new life. Christ did not die and rise from the dead only to make bad people into good people. Christ died and rose to make dying people truly alive!

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