

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
17<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
August 2, 2009

**Summer Series - Credo: Living Truth**  
***The Third Day, He Rose Again***

*...the third day, he rose again from the dead...*

Of all the affirmation of the Apostles' Creed  
the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth  
is perhaps the most difficult for many people to believe.  
Yet here is the article of faith without which  
every other aspect of the faith collapses  
into a heap of babble and nonsense.

How can we believe such an astonishing claim,  
that a man clearly crucified, a corpse so obviously dead and buried,  
could go missing from the tomb,  
and begin appearing to his followers?

Is this preposterous?

Is there any historical or scientific evidence  
that the resurrection really happened?

And do we really have to believe in the literal resurrection of Jesus  
to be Christian?

And if we do believe, how is it not simply escapism,  
by which we disregard our responsibility in this life  
to make this world a more loving and just place to live,  
and replace the causes of justice and compassion  
with glib assurances that all will be well  
in the great by and by?

These and a hundred other really valid questions come to mind  
when we are dealing with this central article of the Christian faith,  
the belief on which our hope stands or falls.

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So, first, why do we believe that on the third day Jesus rose again?

What is the basis of this article of the Creed?

Well, it is based on eye-witness accounts, as they are related in scripture.

The witness to Jesus' resurrection comes to us  
in roughly four different forms in scripture:

- We have, first, what appear to be little liturgical formulas, phrases which look to have been used by the early church in a worship setting.

These brief assertions are often associated with the designation Jesus of Nazareth:

As in Acts 10:

*Jesus of Nazareth, whom you crucified,  
whom God raised from the dead.*

Or in Romans 8:

*It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised,  
who is at the right hand of God,  
who intercedes for us.*

These little proclamations are sprinkled throughout the New Testament.

- Then in addition to these brief formulas we find a longer statement of a more creedal or confessional nature.

In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, Paul summarizes the basic Christian testimony, the eye witness accounts that are the source of our belief.

Paul writes:

*I handed on to you as of first importance  
what I in turn had received:*

*that Christ died for our sins  
in accordance with the scriptures  
and that he was buried,  
and that he was raised on the third day  
in accordance with the scriptures  
and that he appeared to Cephas,  
then to the twelve.*

*Then he appeared*

*to more than five hundred brothers and sisters  
at one time,*

*most of whom are still alive,  
though some have died.*

*Then he appeared to James,  
then to all the apostles.*

*Last of all, as to one untimely born,  
he appeared also to me.*

So here we have the most succinct list of all the relevant reports of people who encountered Jesus after he had been crucified, dead and buried, which would also be the earliest written record, having been penned before the writing of any of the gospel stories.

In addition to these brief formulas and this confession,  
the Gospels relate stories of Jesus' appearance,  
and finally, perhaps most remembered,  
we have the stories of the finding of an empty tomb,  
like the version in Luke which we have read this morning.

\* \* \* \* \*

Now there have been all sorts of historical explanations offered  
in an attempt to account for the early church's claim  
that Jesus was raised from the dead.

One very helpful scholar has catalogued these  
into seven broad categories:<sup>1</sup>

1. The first, certainly, is the orthodox belief:  
that there was in fact an empty tomb,  
and that the appearance stories are relating objective fact.  
This has been the faith of the church  
and is espoused by many very intelligent people,  
as well as competent scholars.
2. The second possibility was that Peter and the other disciples  
simply misinterpreted what they found:  
wanting to believe that Jesus was not really dead,  
the disciples made some faulty observations  
and misconstrued the basic facts on the ground;  
this assumes that, whatever the disciples think they discovered,  
can actually be attributed to some mundane explanation.
3. Or, third, it could be that the empty tomb  
and the appearances of Jesus were all just hallucinations;  
a sort of mass hysteria arose among the disciples  
out of their powerful psychological need for Jesus  
not really to be dead.
4. A fourth hypothesis has been offered positing a deliberate deception  
by the disciples;  
basically, that they stole and hid Jesus' body  
so they could claim a bodily resurrection.
5. A fifth idea offered is that these appearances of Jesus  
were actually genuine visions.  
This notion would discount the stories of the empty tomb  
as false,  
but would uphold and affirm

that the post-mortem Jesus did in fact appear to the disciples  
in God-given visions.

6. A sixth possibility is that belief in the resurrection  
arose not out of any objective experience of an empty tomb  
or any appearance of a risen body,  
but out of theological necessity.  
Because of what the disciples believed about God and Jesus,  
theologically,  
it *simply must* be the case that he could not remain dead,  
but must be raised and vindicated for the gospel  
to indeed be good news.
  
7. Finally, a rather odd possibility  
which serves to represent a whole class of odd suggestions:  
That God' caused Jesus' body to disintegrate  
supernaturally fast  
in order for the disciples to think it had risen.  
This in an odd suggestion  
since it offers as an explanation of a supernatural occurrence,  
yet another equally supernatural occurrence;  
thus solving none of our scientific or historical questions.

\* \* \* \* \*

So you can see that people have been very creative  
in coming up with ways to understand "what exactly happened"  
to Jesus after his death,  
and what happened to the disciples  
to stir in their hearts this profound faith  
and great courage to go with it.

What's a Christian to do with all this historical speculation?  
Simply this: recognize that it is all speculation –  
and that,  
even applying all our most effective historical-critical analysis,  
and all the best tools of historical research,  
the evidence has not led either to the proof or to the disproof  
of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Anyone who claims to have done so  
is revealing that they are already pre-disposed  
to believe one thing or another  
and are approaching the historical study  
with their minds made up  
as to what they want to find.

But we are Christians *not because* we have studied historical evidence but because God has worked a *transformation* of our minds and hearts so that we *believe* in God's steadfast love and mercy revealed to the world in Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Christ.

We are Christians because the Holy Spirit has imparted to us *the gift of faith*.

As Christian believers, we begin from this point – that something profound has occurred in our hearts and minds and that “something” is God's reaching out to us and to the world in Jesus Christ, who is, for us, the most compelling human being ever to have lived, and who is, for us, not only this human being, but the incarnation of God himself, a miraculous reality which is the necessary flip side of the miracle of Jesus' resurrection.

It is from this standpoint that we receive the witness of the early church about the resurrection of Jesus.

We do not try to be, or do we want to be, nor is it possible for us to be disinterested objective observers of historical data.

And lest we be fooled by the overreaching of Enlightenment rationalism it is not possible to view the meaning of historical events from an unbiased, objective viewpoint - we all live and see and think within a worldview, and our worldview allows God to intervene in the material world he created.

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Of the options we have just outlined, I want to think for a moment about the option we called the theological necessity of the resurrection.

I can sum this idea up in the statement from Paul that *if Christ has not been raised our faith is worthless and those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished, so if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people.*

Last week we found comfort in the assurance that no matter what we may suffer in this life, we do not suffer alone, for Christ suffers with us.

When our hopes are dashed and our dreams die before our eyes,

Christ, through his suffering and death,  
has entered that pain with us.  
When our master stories, by which we make sense of life,  
implode on us, and crumble around our feet,  
when our institutions fail us,  
    be they government, church, marriage, family,  
and we enter the despair of our broken reality,  
we find Christ there.  
But is this enough? That Christ is with us in our despair?  
According to Paul: No, never in a million years will it be enough.  
And I must confess that it is not enough for me, to sustain my hope  
    as a Christian – just knowing that God is with me in my pain.

You see if I want to believe in the triumph of Love over Hate,  
of Justice over Greed,  
of the Goodness of Creation over our Destruction of it,  
of the Sacredness of Life over against the way we cheapen it –  
if I want to believe that God is *for us*  
if I want to believe in God at all,  
    then what am I to do with these situations on the earth,  
    these historically hopeless circumstances  
        in which people live and die  
        in sheer agony and misery?

What do I do with the burning and looting of the Christian village of Korian  
    as happened at the hands of violent Muslim extremists in Pakistan  
    on Friday afternoon, two days ago?  
What do I do with a life cut short by cancer?  
    or with a young child whose life is senselessly extinguished  
    by a drunken driver?  
What of the woman who lives a life of severe emotional disorder  
    because of the degrading abuse she suffered as a child?  
What do I do with the perpetual corruption  
    of our best human governments  
    which promise so much and deliver so poorly?  
What do I do with the perpetual blindness of those who think  
    the answer to all the world's woes is simply  
    for all of us to be free to pursue our own self interest –  
    as if the human race can do anything  
    without corrupting it?

All of this human misery is so perfectly and completely assumed by God  
    who entered into our veil of tears in the suffering and death  
    of Jesus, the Son of God.  
But if that is the end of the matter  
    then the very structure of the universe is flawed.

If the life and teaching and ministry and love of Jesus  
are never vindicated – ultimately and eternally vindicated –  
then what sort of God could there be in heaven?

We believe in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead,  
because unless we do we have no hope for anything beyond  
earthly misery.

But *Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has given us a new birth into a living hope  
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...*  
In Christ, we are *being protected by the power of God  
through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*  
In this resurrection faith, we *rejoice  
even if now for a little while we have had to suffer various trials...*

We believe this life is not all there is.  
We believe God has opened a way  
to new and abundant and eternal life.  
We believe this table of fellowship will be our gathering place  
in a kingdom of life that is yet to come;  
and that when we sit down at table with one another  
on that great day of gathering,  
love will have triumphed over every wrong,  
suffering will have been banished forever,  
and death will be swallowed up in victory.

And we hold this hope exactly because we believe  
that on the third day, Jesus,  
who was crucified, dead and buried, was raised by God  
from the dead.  
Thanks be to God!

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<sup>i</sup> Dale Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005) p 199-213. In addition to the catalogue of options here, the presentation of formulas, confessions, appearance and empty tomb stories, relies on Allison's work. Perhaps the most helpful part of the book for the person of faith is the section entitled "Confession" beginning on 213.