

**Easter, 2014 (Easter A) – April 20, 2014**  
**Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24; Matthew 28:1-10**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

“Christ is Risen!” Those familiar words are some of the oldest in the Christian Faith, dating back to the first Easter—and are accompanied by the response, “The Lord is risen indeed!” Indeed—in deed—we proclaim again today that a deed was done, that something actually happened, and that this event matters tremendously.<sup>i</sup> Having said that, let’s consider Easter’s anchorage. I have three interrelated questions for us. First, is our celebration today anchored upon a real historical event which took place in the time of the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate nearly 2,000 years ago? Secondly, was this event of the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead reported in the New Testament in a way that ordinary people can find compelling and convincing?<sup>ii</sup> And thirdly, why is this event of the Resurrection of Jesus—anchored in history—so important for us and our troubled world today?

To answer, or at least more fully understand the first two questions, we have to start by admitting that when put side by side, the four versions of the empty tomb and the bodily Resurrection of Jesus found in the four Gospels are not clear about precisely what happened. We find the details are varied, sometimes in apparent conflict, and a bit confused.<sup>iii</sup> They all agree that it began in the dark, and that the stone had been rolled aside. From there, the various versions from the gospels of Easter morning then include in some configuration or another, Mary Magdalene; Mary the mother of James; Joanna; Salome and some other women; as well as one, or two somewhat terrifying angels in, or nearby, the tomb; also, some terrified guards; and John’s gospel says Peter came also, along with one of the other disciples. Matthew alone speaks of an earthquake. In all the accounts there was the sound of people dashing around, and voices. And there is no agreement even as to the location of Jesus himself. Did he appear at the tomb or only later? And where? To whom did he appear? What did he say? What did he do? These gospel accounts together are not nearly so clear as you might expect them to be. Amongst the gospel writers themselves, there is little attempt at reconciling the details or bolstering the credibility of the witnesses. They’re not on the same page, and they base much of their story on the testimony of women—which is rather amazing given that the testimony of women was considered *invalid* in both religious and civil courts at the time.

However, as longtime journalist and professor of journalism, Joseph Del Porto, who specialized in teaching investigative reporting, warned, “Beware of logical stories, told by several witnesses, who all agree on the details.” “Such agreement among witnesses,” he pointed out, “is a dead giveaway that the story has been made up. Real stories are seen and reported differently by each witness, and it is in the midst of their [varied] accounts that you find the truth.”<sup>iv</sup> Taken as a body of reports, these Resurrection accounts comprise just the kind of story that has a genuine ring of truth. Certainly if the early church had invented the Easter story, and it really was a hoax, they would have gone about it differently. They would have tried for consistency and a greater air of credibility than with all those women eyewitnesses. If people of the caliber

of the gospel writers were making it up, they would have done a much better job. But what we have is a collection of accounts in which no one even attempted to smooth over and “clean up” the rough places. Instead, there seems to have been a decision to let the varied eyewitness accounts stand. They seem to be telling it simply the way it was, from the different angles of *several* eyewitness accounts. These narratives are as fragmented and faulty and shadowy and incomplete as life itself. But they *are* all in agreement that something unimaginable happened—that the same Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified, dead as a doornail and buried, was again fully alive, tangible, recognizable and at large and loose in the world.

So, most importantly, what convinced the Biblical writers that Jesus had risen from the dead was not the sequence of events, nor the particular lineup of witnesses, but rather Jesus’ living presence. For the New Testament witnesses and eyewitnesses, the Resurrection was no mere metaphor. When they spoke of Jesus as raised from the dead, they meant Jesus fully alive and at large in the world—not just a powerful memory or a timeless teaching; not just a shimmering ideal of human goodness or the truth that never dies; or doubt that turns to faith, or fear that turns into hope. NO. A world-transforming religion hardly emerges from saying, “Let’s *pretend* he was resurrected.” As Frederick Buechner put it, “Unless something very real indeed took place on that strange, confused morning, there would be no New Testament, no Church, no Christianity.”<sup>v</sup> And St. Paul put it in even more stark terms, writing to the church in Corinth, “...and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”<sup>vi</sup>

That compels us, finally, to address the third question I asked earlier: why is this event of the Resurrection of Jesus—anchored in history—so important for us and our troubled world today? What difference does it make? Well, on Easter morning there was the beginning of what God intends for all creation. It was the beginning of the end for death’s claim on humanity, death’s claim on you and me. There was no stone covering a cave that could keep the dead Jesus dead, and in our day, no container tight enough—whether it be physical, psychological, or socio-political—that can keep humanity from being reached, touched and changed by the Risen Jesus who is loose and at large in the world, continuing his mission of repairing and restoring all to right relationship with God and one another.

Here is my key point: the Easter story anchored in history cannot be fully appreciated apart from the *change* it made in the followers of Jesus. Even the most skeptical of those who may deny that Jesus was risen in deed, are forced to concede that something happened. As William Sloane Coffin put it, “The proof of Easter is not a rolled-away stone, but carried-away Christians.”<sup>vii</sup> Something really changed these earliest witnesses to the resurrection. They were ordinary people, not especially fast learners, especially the male disciples, and not very courageous. In fact, as Buechner points out, “they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins.”<sup>viii</sup> But in their encounters with the Risen Jesus, they become strong, joyful, convinced, committed and bold believers, leaders, apostles. As a result of Jesus’ resurrection they become willing

to stand before crowds, courts, governors and emperors, and even face their own death to proclaim as fact the Resurrection of Jesus.

All of the Scriptural accounts of encounters with the Risen Jesus have the effect of restating and restarting the call to discipleship.<sup>ix</sup> And soon their renewed discipleship would be put to the test. For example, in our passage from Acts, Peter makes it his business to proclaim to the crowd both who the Risen Jesus and the Spirit-filled disciples are. He pulls no punches as he speaks boldly in public – a far cry from Peter’s denials the first time around.<sup>x</sup> Significantly, the Apostles are far less concerned to preach about the teachings of Jesus than to announce His Resurrection, and they point to the death and Resurrection of Jesus as their only explanation for the changes in their lives. Their proclamation had a power which persuaded others to change their ways of living, so that the forces set free on that first Easter literally overturned the ancient world. Again, a world-transforming religion hardly emerges from saying, “Let’s *pretend* he was resurrected.”

But why make belief in the Resurrection of Jesus a *necessary* point of our Faith, as St. Paul and later our Creeds would have us do? What are the stakes: my stakes, your stakes, the world’s stakes, in its truth or falsehood, as theologian Howard MacMullen puts it?<sup>xi</sup> Well, the stakes are high, insofar as the Living Christ, Risen from the dead, offers real hope that in this world where suffering and violence so often seem to rule the day, there is in fact a greater power working toward a solution to the world’s problems. If Jesus is Risen in deed, then no matter how deep the pain or loss, no matter how devastating the tragedy, no matter how fierce the battle with the powers of evil in this world, there is certainty that the final victory is God’s. The good news of Easter is that the God who raised Jesus from the dead in deed, and promises the same for all of us, is not baffled by our problems and limitations.<sup>xii</sup> The stakes are no less than this, namely, if Christ is Risen, there is real hope for all of us here and all humanity—a hope that will not disappoint us.

The fact of Resurrection says that we are not inevitably nor ultimately lost; our world is being, and will be, repaired and restored; we have been and can be redeemed—all of us—everyone and everything. Christ is Risen—the powers of death, destructiveness and despair have had their day! Easter proclaims, as William Sloane Coffin put it, the victory of “seemingly powerless love over loveless power” in all times and in all places, including our own.<sup>xiii</sup> So, Resurrection is not just a fact to be believed, but an experience to be shared. It is not just an item of history and a hope for the future, but a divine transformative power here and now.<sup>xiv</sup> And we believe that the Risen Christ is still at work in the world. Jesus, who died is Risen for us in order to be with and in us, to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and more courage in our spines, as Coffin put it.<sup>xv</sup> To celebrate Easter, then, is to embrace and rejoice in the Risen Jesus who calls and empowers us as an Easter people in this Good Friday world to participate in His ongoing work of repairing the world—God’s world—until God is “all in all.”<sup>xvi</sup> If the Lord is Risen indeed, then the same resurrection power that transformed the lives of Mary Magdalen, Peter and the others, can transform our lives not just in the distant future, but in the life we live today.<sup>xvii</sup> So, let us each look into our own lives and see

what change we have already experienced; and while the Risen Lord still has plenty of work to do in each of us, he's done enough and we've changed enough that we can make this ancient proclamation our own: Alleluia, Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen Indeed, Alleluia.

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<sup>i</sup> As theologian Howard MacMullen put it, "Easter is not merely the assertion that [we] feel good when [we] think about Jesus; [or] that he haunts [our] memory, stimulates [our] imagination, or challenges [our] understanding. He is present in those parts of our inner self, of course, but the Easter proclamation is that he has, in fact and in deed, risen from the grave... [So then,] if Christ is risen in deed, then our faith is based upon a certain hope. If he is not risen in deed, if somewhere in Palestine his bones have long since crumbled to dust, then...our hope would be based upon an illusion, a non-deed." - Howard H. MacMullen, Jr. "Jesus Rose – So What?" in *The Seasons* (Canton, MA: Kairos Press, Lent-Easter 2003), p. 29.

Sure, Jesus showed us that a life given away for love's sake is the life truly worth living, and we don't need to be sure that he rose from the dead to know this. However, Jesus is more than a saintly role model and teacher. In fact, without the fact of Jesus risen from the dead, we can't help but conclude, along with St. Paul, that our proclamation and our faith—at least a key part of our Faith that Jesus is the Savior of the world—would be in vain (see I Corinthians 15:12-34). And as many others have stated, Jesus himself would have been either a madman or a fool, pursuing a futile plan born of insanity or delusion; because, unless he was just who and what he said he was as the Son and was in deed raised from the dead then he was either deluded himself or a conscious or unconscious deceiver whose plan to convince others of his redemptive purposes went badly awry. Frederick Buechner puts it this way, "If the life that was in Jesus died [forever] on the cross; if the love that was in him came to a [final] end when his heart stopped beating; if the truth that he spoke was no more if no less timeless than the great truths of any time; if all that he had in him to give to the world was a little glimmer of light to make bearable the inexorable approach of endless night—then all was despair." - Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 100.

<sup>ii</sup> without having to rely on the complex subtleties of modern Biblical scholarship.

<sup>iii</sup> First off, there is something strange about the Resurrection story in its various accounts in the four gospels that boils down to this: in every gospel account the friends and disciples of Jesus are surprised utterly by his resurrection. It is though everything had escaped them, from Jesus' parable hints to the straightforward promises he made that he would be raised from the dead. The resurrection is neither awaited nor expected. It catches them entirely off guard.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in Howard H. MacMullen, Jr. "Jesus Rose – So What?" in *The Seasons* (Canton, MA: Kairos Press, Lent-Easter 2003), p. 31. And so, written at different times and for different audiences, and to make different points, these Biblical accounts of this event are a collection of eyewitness and corroborating witness accounts—a collection of primary data and evidence that piles up when such a big, complicated news story is breaking. And there is, in fact, a fairly clear picture of the progression of events; the difficulties come less with the broad sweep of these narratives than with the detailed record of Jesus' Resurrection appearances. Regarding the times and locations of these resurrection appearances, a strict linear progression of just whom he appeared to and when and where just may not be possible to put together.

<sup>v</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Listening to Your Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 101. For all the New Testament eyewitnesses and witnesses the Resurrection is *no mere metaphor*. When they speak of their encounters with Jesus of Nazareth raised from the dead, they mean an actual encounter with Jesus alive and at large in the world, alive to the touch; so alive that in today's gospel account, Luke even records that Jesus could eat broiled fish right in their presence—a truth stranger than any fiction or metaphor. Their witness was not some otherwise poetic way of saying, "let's pretend he was raised from the dead." Their's was not just some figurative proclamation of some lasting shimmering ideal of human goodness living on in their hearts, or of the resilient power of hopeful thought in the midst of tragedy, or of the timelessness of the truth of Jesus' teachings which they remembered. Nor was their proclamation one of

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celebrating the invincible immortal soul or spirit of an otherwise dead and buried Jesus, somehow marching on. No, their proclamation of Jesus as raised from the dead is much stranger, indeed. With help from Frederick Buechner we can see better how Luke and the other gospel writers meant what they said regarding the fact of Jesus' Resurrection, as distinct from metaphoric reinterpretations which seek to avoid or deny the Resurrection through some form or another of a wish for immortality—which is what most people believe in, it seems.

Buechner states that “Immortal” means death-proof, somehow never dying. And to believe in the immortality of the soul, for example, is to believe, as the old song goes, that though John Brown's body lies a moldering in the grave, his soul goes marching on—simply because marching on is the nature of souls. Bodies die, but souls don't—that's what most people believe. Whether that's true or false, I sure don't claim to know. But what we do know is that the Bible does not share that view. The Biblical view is much stranger—and yet, to me, more compelling, and differs in several ways from the belief in immortality.

First, the Biblical understanding of humanity is not that one has a body, but that one is a body. The body and soul which make up a person are inextricably part and parcel of each other, as the sticks and flames that make up a fire. The Hebrew word for body and soul is one word, “nephesh.” When we die, we die one hundred percent, all of us. God's breath of life returns to God. Otherwise, there is nothing to marching on with.

A second thing the Bible speaks of, as Buechner reminds us, is that the body is something good, not something gross or embarrassing. The body is a good and glorious creation. How could it be otherwise, since it was created by a good and glorious God? Sure, our bodies do feel like a big hindrance and embarrassment, sometimes; and we know how they break down, all too well. But the body is a good thing nonetheless. So when we die, something good dies. So, for example, when Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus had died, he didn't speak some pious clichés about the will of God or Lazarus' soul or spirit living on. Instead, he wept.

A third thing the Bible speaks of is God, and therefore it speaks of God's action in resurrection, rather than some timeless, invincible spirit of humanity that is immortal, that can't die. Those who believe in the immortality of the soul believe that life after death is as natural and familiar a function of a person as digestion after a meal. But the Bible, instead, speaks of resurrection. It is entirely unnatural and utterly strange. Buechner's insight is that humanity does not go living beyond the grave because that is how we are made. Rather, we go to the grave as dead as doornails, and are given life back again by God in resurrection, just as we were given it by God in the first place; because that is the way God is made, as it were.

And what good news that is! If it were up to us to work out the details of our afterlife—or afterlives—we would probably make as many mistakes as we have in our present life, only on an eternal scale.

Jesus Risen from the dead is the proclamation of Easter—Jesus who is called “the first born from the dead.” Yet, Jesus did not raise himself from death, invincible as his spirit was. No, it was God who raised him, and did so in his whole body/soul.

From this Biblical witness, the early Church created its Creeds, all of which affirm belief and hope in the Resurrection of the Body. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of a human being, but a new and revised version of all the things which make us the particular human beings that we are, and which we need something like a body to express—things such as our personality, the way we look, the sound of our voice, our particular capacity for creating and loving—a “spiritual body” as St. Paul called it—spiritual yet nonetheless a body, which can even eat a piece of broiled fish, as Luke's gospel testifies.

And so the idea of the immortality of the soul is based on the view of humanity's indomitable and invincible spirit. The idea of the resurrection of the body, on the other hand, is based on the experience of

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God's unspeakable Love and Power once the human spirit is snuffed out. Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 41-43.

<sup>vi</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:14. And so, the Easter Faith does not exist because Jesus' spirit and example are proclaimed; rather, the Easter Faith is proclaimed because the crucified, dead and buried Jesus, raised from the dead by God, actually, really, lives. The God who took on humanity in the incarnation of Jesus born in Bethlehem did not discard that humanity when Jesus died. That humanity remains one with God in the life, death and now resurrected life of Jesus and will so to the end of time. And so with us as well—as St. Paul testifies in our reading from Colossians that our lives are hidden with Christ in God, also.

<sup>vii</sup> William Sloane Coffin, "Civic Responsibility in the New Millennium" in *Fellowship* magazine, November-December, 2000.

<sup>viii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking (London: Collins, 1973), p. 62.

<sup>ix</sup> Easter marks the renewal of discipleship. It began with grief and remorse and fear, disbelief and doubt, and then awe-struck wonder and joy; and finally, movement out on the road – many roads – with the disciples transformed into apostles. The first time these people were called to discipleship it was a bit simpler. They dropped everything and went. There is no record of their having previously known him well, nor having heard him preach and then mulling over the message, and then, ripe for an invitation, finally meeting him on the road or out on the lake. That didn't happen. Nor did Jesus lay out the details of what they might expect that first time around – they did *not* hear something like, "Come join my vagabond community and live by begging. We'll stir up trouble almost everywhere we go. Eventually we'll go to Jerusalem to confront the authorities. You will betray me and deny me and scatter, as I'm arrested, tried and executed. Now come, follow me." No such thing is said. It was simpler in that first go round. At the start, Jesus offered neither a plan nor predictions, but only himself. His invitation only said, "Come and see." After Easter, however, there is a little more water under the bridge, as it were. When the disciples encounter – and are called to follow – the Risen Jesus, they know a good deal more about what that means and where it leads, and who he is and who they themselves are.

<sup>x</sup> And all the other people we meet in the book of Acts had been greatly changed from the slow and indecisive bumbler we see them as in the Gospels.

<sup>xi</sup> MacMullen, *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>xii</sup> As William Temple (former Archbishop of Canterbury) wrote during the Second World War: "There is nothing in the world of which I feel so certain. I have no idea what the Resurrection will be like, and I'm glad that I have not, as I'm sure it would be wrong. I do not want it for myself as mere continuance, but I want it for my understanding of life. And moreover, the statement 'God is Love' appears to me nonsense in view of the world God has made, if there is no other."

<sup>xiii</sup> (See William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 70). By rising indeed from death, Jesus has ransomed, redeemed, and saved all existence. He has harrowed and hallowed the hell of human history and declared that our past is usable. He has eaten our bread and drunk our wine and proclaimed our present is livable. And he has died our death and, as the Risen Christ, proclaims that we have a future. Easter has to do not only with one person's escape from the grave two thousand years ago—and not only a sure promise of Resurrection for each and all of us on some Final Day—but also with the here and now.

Therefore, the message of the Resurrection is that this present world matters; that the problems and pains, travail and tragedy of this present world matter; and that the Living God has made a decisive bridgehead into this distressed and warring world with Christ's healing and conquering love. And also, just as Jesus appeared at his birth as a helpless child that the world was free to care for or destroy, so now the Risen Jesus also appears as the poor, the stranger, the widowed, the war-torn refugee and appears in every form of human need that the world is free to address or ignore. That's why we pray, "Thy

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kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” To be sure, Easter day was the first great answer to that prayer.

<sup>xiv</sup> As Frederick Buechner reminds us, Jesus is also Christ risen in the downtrodden hearts of those in every generation who although we have never touched the mark of the nails on his hands, nonetheless we’ve been ourselves so touched by him that we believe and act in a way at least enough to get our own bearings by him. As the Risen Jesus resettles us in our own lives, as it were, He also unsettles us by calling us to abandon our loyalties to the parts of our lives that lull us into complacency, smother us in convention and choke us with success or despair. And the same Risen Jesus is also present with and in all who continue His struggle against fear, greed, ignorance, violence and injustice in all its forms, here and now, on this good earth. And so, following the Risen Christ also demands that we pledge our loyalty to God’s truth and goodness by ending our loyalties to individuals and institutions who crucify, i.e. who “possess power without compassion, might without morality, and strength without sight,” as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it (Martin Luther, King, Jr., Speech “We Must Speak” delivered at Riverside Church, April 4, 1967). We who gather as a community of faith—along with many others—are called to share in the ongoing life and mission of the Risen Jesus. So, while others see life as cheap and expendable, as Easter people we promote the dignity and proclaim the worth of every person.

<sup>xv</sup> William Sloane Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 70.

<sup>xvi</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23. The phrase “an Easter people in a Good Friday world” is attributed by some to Barbara Johnson, *Splashes of Joy in the Cesspools of Life* (W Publishing Group/Thomas Nelson, 1992), pp. 193ff. – although I have used this phrase since I first heard it from both Bishop Barbara Harris and William Sloane Coffin in the 1980s.

<sup>xvii</sup> And so, to say that Jesus has risen in Easter is God’s answer to the question, “Do we live in a world where the past or present or future is beyond redemption, where our self-destructive patterns are inevitable and unbreakable, where the Love of God is ultimately vanquished and God’s Power defeated?” Certainly this describes the world of Good Friday, the crucifixion, and is, by and large, our world today. In our world the bad overcomes the good, and humanity overcomes God, not in appearance only but in dreadful fact. Children (and other innocents) die and cannot be restored to life. Violence begets violence, and life is often consequential—we reap what we sow. In places like Palestine and Iraq, Congo, Syria and Afghanistan we see victims’ graves become the point of departure for the next series of killing in ongoing spirals of violence.

Resurrection is therefore profoundly unsettling, because it is both an overturning of reality as we know it, and an entrance into what St. Paul described as dying and rising in union with Christ—a new act of creation. Presently we know how unsettling that feels. It is easier for us to remain anxious and despairing about our lives in the midst of intractable conflicts and wars, a troubled economy, and a polarized and poisoned political climate. It is easier to be trapped in a stuck situation or a feeling of inevitability than to break free. It is easier to feel like a victim than to take responsibility for ourselves, for and with others, and for the world. It is quite simply easier to play dead than to act alive. We can stop playing dead only when we feel the fact that Jesus took the “sting” out of death. We still die, of course—but Jesus has defused death by being totally present to us in life.