

Trinity Church (ELCA)

Stephens City, Virginia

Sunday's Sermon

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Easter, 2016

So *what*?

So *what* that this ancient Middle Eastern peasant preacher is alleged to have risen from the dead? So *what* if hymns are sung and prayers are prayed and anthems are sung? So *what*? so *what* are you *here* for this stunning spring morning? You want 'proof?' you want evidence? you want the 'facts?' Well, I'm afraid I don't have them. All I have – and all anybody sitting around you has - is *faith*: sometimes broken, sometimes fervent, sometimes absent 'faith...' and not much else to go on.

When I got here going on 5 years ago now, we agreed that we were gonna' have to do things 'differently' - maybe a *little*, maybe a *lot* around here – to get this ship back afloat. Saw a billboard that reminded me of that the other day: at the top, it read "*Virginia Cremation Society*." In the middle was a picture of a casket, and underneath, it read: "*Think Outside the Box*." and I thought of Easter – because if there's any day when *everybody* – I don't care how deep or strong or firm your faith: if there's one day when everyone: believer, non-believer, believer "wanna-be" – is challenged to think – in one way or another - "outside the box" it's Easter. *Outside* the "box" of the dank 'nothingness' of the grave to which we're all consigned sooner or later...*outside* the comfortable box of our rationality and sensibility...*outside* the reality of the suffocating evil swirling all around us... and, even outside *ourselves*: to the Light of a most unexpected and, for many, unbelievable, claim of a new reality: the claim that a *dead* man has come back to *life* – and because *he* lives, so do *we*.

When we think that way - we are either the stupidest, or the luckiest and most to be envied people on the planet - because when you face new realities, you have 3 options of how to respond: you can just stay bewildered...you can engage in the denial of it as fiction and fantasy – or, you can begin the long, and sometimes painful, process of slowly assimilating it.

That is where we *all* are this morning, and those are our Easter choices: cynicism, denial, or acceptance. The problem is that Easter doesn't shock us anymore. It's just part of the "background" of our lives: tucked somewhere down between Cadbury eggs – which, while quite tasty - *do* look a little gross on the inside...down beside who's winning in the Grapefruit League...hosing off the deck furniture, and getting the car cleaned for the first time since last November...with a wad-full of purple 'Peeps' melting in your mouth.

Easter always feels a little like Groundhog Day: only 'Punxsutawney Phil' eventually goes back into his hole... but, Jesus *doesn't*...he *stays* out, and is *still* out to this very day...

At least that's how the story goes...and, because it does, about the best many can bring themselves to feel about Easter now-a-days – if, indeed, anything – is bafflement and skepticism. And why not?: the world is so astronomically out of 'kilter:' you have to wonder: how come no lightning bolt from heaven or charge of enraged angels? Where *is* this resurrected God when we need him?...a question of cosmic...and eternal proportions.

Easter just doesn't 'move' us anymore - and even though in my darkest anger sometimes, I want to blame God for failing to do his job - at the very least don't you think we ought to allow Easter to honorably *confront* us: put the squeeze on our intellect a bit...dissect our illusions...challenge our understanding of reality? In and of itself, Easter does all three.

"If God really exists," asks Frederick BUECHNER in a sermon he calls 'Message In the Stars,' "why doesn't he prove it, instead of leaving us here in our terrible uncertainty?"

It's a need all of us have had at some time: that God – in some objective, verifiable and convincing way – *prove* himself to us, validate the Resurrection, and show us what *difference* that makes in our often sad and lonely journey in lives. So, Buechner proposes: "What, if God took the great Milky Way, brightened it up a little, and rearranged it into letters light years tall that said, "I AM?"

Can you imagine the sheer awesomeness of the "Great Unknown" suddenly making itself known? Some would simply faint dead away, others would sink to their knees...and more than a few would bolt to safety in terror. "Even preachers would discover that they'd been right all along - perhaps more "right" than they had ever quite been able to believe themselves..." Churches would overflow. wars would cease. Religious hatred and political bigotry would be defeated by Divine Love...

"But then," Buechner continues, "several years would pass, and a young child out in the field one night would look up, shrug her shoulders and say "so *what*? So *what* if God exists – what difference does *that* make?" And in the twinkling of an eye, the Message would fade away for good."

We *all* want 'proof': I could tell you about the gathering of philosophers at Yale where one professor – using the same probability they work out insurance Actuarial Tables with - calculated that there's actually a 97% chance that the resurrection really did happen! But, so what? What difference does that *make* in the world or, in your life?

An honest analysis would lead us to realize that it's *not* proof of God's *existence* that we crave, but proof of God's

presence. That's the *real* miracle of Easter we so long for – and, it's also, the miracle we really get, but often disregard.

The Most Rev. Michael Curry, new Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church writes in his Easter letter: "It's easy to dismiss this 'miracle' - this tale of Resurrection – as a wonderful ideal, but nothing more...thinking – as we see the world around us – that perhaps the strong *do* survive, maybe might *does* make 'right,' and you better look out for #1." But, Curry says, "I have to ask a question: not *my* question, actually - it's Dr. Phil's, "How's that workin' out for ya?" How's that workin' out for the *world*?"

Well, it's not –because - no matter how hard we work to make it that way - that's not the way life was created to be. But, in the Resurrection, Jesus has shown us that self-giving, sacrificial love: of God, and of the other, *is*. In 3 short days, all the world's wisdom was turned upside-down and inside out – which is really 'outside-in' and right-side up: because of Easter "God's love *wins* and *can* change the world from the nightmare it often is, into the dream God intends" – through us.

Yet, even as we speak, we stand not only in the shadow of the empty cross and tomb, but also in the shadow of Brussels and Paris and - for some of us - the memory of 9-11...in the shadow of those all around the world who have been wounded and maimed by life throughout the Ages...and in the shadow of those who weep and mourn wherever they may be this very second. But, in a world mourning, we're never too sure how to move forward. The Resurrection shows us how: "Jesus wasn't crucified in a *cathedral* between 2 *candles*, but on a cross between two *thieves*; not in a brightly decorated sanctuary, but on the town garbage dump - the kind of place where terrorists use the guise of 'religion' to smear their hearts of evil; the kind of place where people cheat and lie and connive for power and money and to get their way – where 'love' can turn to 'hate' over a spouse leaving the top off a toothpaste tube.

Yet that, Bishop Curry believes, is "where Christians ought to *be*, and *what* Christians ought to be *about*."

God speaks far more often than we give him credit for: gently and, often, unexpectedly: in the helping hand, the warm smile, the needed hug...he speaks thru the hungry child in a 3rd-world country savoring his first bowl of rice, and in the

single mother seeing her son off to college on an academic scholarship.

"God speaks in the streets: with a bunch of bums – warming his hands over a can of burning garbage, and through backpacks of food given in an Eagle scout project - like we just did last week. The risen Christ speaks through *us*: in the emergency room, and the funeral home...in the birthing suite and the cancer wing. "He speaks not only to comfort those of us who are stuck there, but also "to stir us up, and to remind us that we are his long-lost children meant for more "excellent lives" – and, if we'll give him a chance, he'll make sure we have them.

"Be not afraid" this Son of God tells us...

"Lo, I am with you always," promises the One risen from the tomb - "even unto the end of the world.' He is *with* us on our journeys – has been since even before our journey began - and, he ain't goin' nowhere. *That* is the Proclamation of Easter.

A poor Chinese famer one lost his one horse. The neighbors came around to say, "that's too bad..." to which the farmer said, "Maybe..."

A week later, the horse was back - bringing with him 7 new wild horses. and, all the neighbors came around to say, "How *wonderful!*" The farmer said, "Maybe..."

The next day, the farmer's son - trying to tame one of the wild horses was thrown and broke his leg. "How *awful!*," moaned the farmer's neighbors. But, he just said "Maybe..."

Later, the Chinese draft board came around looking for men to conscript into the army. They rejected the farmer's son because he had a broken leg."

"Wow!," the neighbors all exclaimed. "Isn't that *great!*" And, all the farmer said was, "Maybe..."

Maybe that's as far as *you* can get this Easter morning as well: a fragile – but honest: "Well...*maybe*..."

But, if 'proof': "Here I am," are the words we long to hear from God – so, too, are they the words God longs to hear from us: "Here I am..." If we can say them – however feebly or haltingly they may be - then maybe – just maybe, we'll all be able to shout with confidence: "He *is* risen!" (*He is risen, indeed!*) Alleluia!

The Resurrection's already given us a good start!
Amen

Sources Consulted

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