

Easter, April 5, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

“Is What You See All You Get?”

Mark 12:18-27

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Well I know I'm supposed to say this because I'm a minister and after all it's Easter – but I really do believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead: the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the historical resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! After his death on Good Friday on the cross, after he was buried in the tomb, I really do believe that Jesus, in the body, rose again from the dead.

And furthermore, I believe that when anybody really believes that, that Jesus rose not just in the spirit but in the body, that it changes everything.

- It changes, for example, what we think about God, what God is interested in. The God of the resurrection of the body is not just interested in the spiritual world, the theological world, but in the real world of materiality and matter of which we are a part. Matter matters to God! Stuff matters to God. Your life in the body matters to God.
- It changes what we believe about Jesus and about his significance, about his divinity and his teaching. His teaching is not just the teaching of a wise man that we turn to when we want to; but the teaching of the only risen Lord and Savior, the one who is alive and with us now to be our teacher today as he was with his first followers 2000 years ago.
- It changes what we think about ourselves: about the meaning and the purpose of our lives, which as we grow older our lives seem to get shorter and shorter with time seeming so quickly to run out on us. What's the significance of our short “three score years and ten” in a cosmos in which we are mere specks of dust? And if God raises people from the dead in the body so that our individuality is preserved forever, that changes things too doesn't it? Doesn't this say that the most significant other of all is vitally interested in you and me, and who we are, forever? Eternally? This is surely both a blessing, and a burden!

These things are important. They're certainly important to me. But this importance is not the fundamental reason *why* I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus not just because I like to think that it's true and not just because it brings meaning and purpose to my life (though it does bring meaning and purpose to my life), but I believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus *because, to me, nothing explains what happened after Jesus' death on Good Friday better than the fact that his first followers saw him with their own eyes and heard them with their ears and were invited to touch his body, his broken but resurrected body with their hands.*

The Sabbath Move from Saturday to Sunday. Think for a moment about one of the changes which took place after that Good Friday, a change in day which may at first seem to be insignificant, but I think it's powerfully significant. Chaining a day that is Holy from one day to another is no small thing! Let me put it like this: We are gathered here on Easter *Sunday*! Why is it (and you've probably never asked this) that we are here not on, let's say Easter *Saturday*? How is it that the Holy Day sacred to the Jewish people from the foundation of the Earth as a marker of the power of the God of creation, how is it that anybody could take and change (or simply no longer observe) that Holy Day, and move it one day forward to another day? Who would have the right and the authority to do that? Why would anybody think of doing that? How could that possibly happen? But it did!

And, more startlingly, it happened through people who had no standing in ancient Judaism: we are here 2000 years later on Sunday because those first disciples, outsiders, and fairly ignorant as they were, saw something, heard something and were invited at times to touch something, that was intimately related to that first Easter Sunday, something that was so significant, so creative, so filled with the power of creation – in fact expressive of God's hand in the equivalent of “a new creation” – that they felt the liberty to do it. And others, just as remarkably, followed in their steps. The Sabbath, not on Saturday but on Sunday, how is that even possible at the hands of some Galilean fishermen?

The Existence of Christianity. Or think of something bigger than that “change in the calendar”: think of the very existence of Christian faith. The very existence of Christian faith is another reason for our being here today. Why was it that those disciples having seen Jesus crucified – their leader crucified dead and buried, the end of everything they stood for – why didn't they just run away, go home as if the whole thing was a bad dream; and then, once home, stay at home thereafter, back to business as usual? What in the world could have inspired them to change everything in their lives and to keep on going when they had faced such desolation as this? They knew it was over. For them to keep on track with Jesus, whom they had seen crucified, dead and buried,

- It would take something as powerful for these people, who were very down to earth, as seeing Jesus with their eyes, his hands with the holes for the nails, his side with the wound for the spear . . .
- It would take these disciples seeing something as powerful as this together and not alone by themselves . . .
- It would take these disciples seeing something not just once but repeatedly, something as powerful as this . . .

No hallucination would have done it. No wishful thinking would have done it . . . though many people; many people have suggested that that's exactly what happened on that first Easter Sunday: hallucination, wishful thinking, the desire to keep things going by.

As if they said: “Well let's just say the tomb was empty and he rose from the dead and we will keep this idea of Jesus going on as long as we possibly can.”

For me to think that that's what happened actually takes more belief than believing that they actually saw the bodily resurrection of Jesus himself. Think with me just for a moment about who those first followers of Jesus were.

- They were ordinary everyday people. None of them was exceptional. Not a single one of them was exceptional.
- Some of them worked for the government as some of you do. One of them worked for the IRS (the Internal Roman revenue Service?)
- Some of them had small businesses, running a fishing operation in the Sea of Galilee.
- They were just ordinary people, average people trying to make ends meet, feed their families, provide a living, understand how to make sense of this world around about them in a land which was filled with oppression and difficulty and trouble.
- By and large by their own admission they were pretty slow on the uptake of anything that was new or that required some imagination. Jesus left no official records whatsoever that we are aware of, so they were the ones who re-told and then wrote up (or had their followers write up) the story of Jesus; and for some unknown reason, unless it was true, they spoke about their own weakness and their own slowness to understand him. Time and again they misunderstood Jesus. Time and again they had to ask Jesus for help in order to understand what he was saying. They just were not that smart.
- Yet now, according to some of these theories, they became really smart, at a time when the power of the Roman Empire had been launched against their leader. They were not leaders, they were followers, yet at this time when they were scared out of their wits that they too would die, we are asked to believe that they had the intellect, that they had the audacity, that they had the wherewithal, to invent a story that was so powerful in their lives that in later years they were willing to die for it and to ask others to believe it and to be willing to die for it as well.

For me, my response to this suggestion, is probably the response of others who think that there is no resurrection: that you have to be kidding. This option takes more imagination, more credulity than the belief that the tomb was actually empty and Jesus was seen with their own eyes, heard with their own ears and that he invited them, or some of them, at least to touch him.

Besides that, when we read about the ancient world and try to figure out what was going on in the ancient world with regard to life, and life-after-death, scholar N.T. Wright (from Oxford and now St. Andrews University in the United Kingdom), one who knows the ancient Mediterranean world of the 1st Century as well as anybody else, says that there is nothing in the ancient world, no commonly held belief in the ancient world, that would have inspired those disciples from the backwater of Galilee to think that they could convince anybody of the importance of the ongoing ministry of Jesus by saying "Ah, he's not dead, he's alive, and if you believe this it's worth following from this point on." There is nobody saying "if you can show us somebody who rose from the dead we will believe in you." (See his book, "Surprised by Hope" or his IVP video, "Resurrection").

Go ahead, for example, 20 years later to the story of a man called Paul, the greatest missionary of the early church, preaching in the Greek city of Athens (see Acts 17). He begins to speak about Jesus being raised from the dead, bodily raised from the dead, and the reaction to what he says by the intellectual citizens of Athens is that they just “scoffed!” They laughed. They thought that this was completely inconceivable, or worse, bizarre and irrelevant.

The ancient Greeks of that time if they believed that there was anything after you died, then it was probably a gloomy kind of existence beyond the river Styx in the underworld, a world of phantoms but not a world in which people were there in bodies that were real. Or, on the other hand, they might have believed (as some people do today in this New Agey world in which we live) in a release of our spirits from the body, a return of the spirit to the great divine cosmos from which we came. But nothing, nothing about the resurrection of the body, which was deemed either to be a spiritual irrelevancy or a prison to be escaped from! As in Athens, they would have found it laughable.

And even in ancient Judaism while there were some groups (including, according to the Jewish historian Josephus, the Pharisees) that believed that at the end of time when the world as we know it was “wrapped up,” there would be a general resurrection of the dead in the body, there was no one believing that anybody would come back from the dead in the body right here and now.

There were some Jews who thought, rather like the Greeks, of some ghostly existence in a place called Sheol, but there were also some who were so rationally skeptical that they believed in absolutely nothing when you died. Nothing happened after death period. It was over, what you saw, what you see is all that you get. The group that believed this more than any others and perhaps there were others as well but that we know about is a group called the Sadducees who are mentioned in our passage of scripture in Mark Chapter 12.

So let me take you back to that chapter. The scene in Mark 12 takes place just before the end of Jesus’ life, when there are people who seek to trap Jesus with tricky questions that they want Jesus to answer in a way that will upset someone and perhaps even upset the Roman authorities so much that they will take him away and put him to death. Eventually of course he was taken away and put to death, but not because he incriminated himself with his answers to these questions!

The Sadducees were among the questioners, and their question was based on the fact that they did not believe that there was anything at all that took place after you died. It’s life-before-death . . . and that’s all that there is.

So they come up to Jesus and they’re as skeptical as those folks would have been in Athens, and they ask Jesus this question about a woman who ends up marrying seven brothers. And they say with a sneer in their voice “So Jesus explain to us if you possibly can: when the resurrection comes who’s her husband going to be? I mean which of the seven is her husband, huh? Try to figure that out!”

It's rather like figuring out and I spent some time doing this but not perhaps with their skepticism, trying to figure out what age are we going to be in Heaven? Or what height are we going to be? Or some of us are more concerned with what weight are we going to be in Heaven?

So we have all these questions about our life and I think they're fun to think about but they didn't think there was any fun in this. This was deadly serious. They thought the whole thing about resurrection, and in particular, ongoing individual existence (which requires a body to differentiate "me" from "everyone else") was so silly, so stupid, that they wanted to put Jesus on the spot, to make a fool of him, as if to say,

"Come on Jesus. Grow up! We live in a modern world you're from the country. We are from the city. You are not educated. We are educated. We can no longer believe in those childish things any more. What you see is what you get and that is all there is. Anything else they would have said is wishful thinking. Anything else is just fairy tales. Anything else worse than that is just a living lie. Living a lie!"

Sometimes in the 21st Century we think we are the first people in history to think this way with this kind of skepticism, that everybody else before us was gullible. We think that we are the first people to say these things and to have these kinds of doubts. I need to say to you it's just not true. Historically it is just not true. There were rational skeptics back in the time of Jesus just as there are today. Within Judaism and beyond. The idea that we are the first to think this way because we now are "modern" is just not true: the Greeks and Romans thought they were modern as well!

Though – having said that – there may, of course, be some things in our modern world which are in fact different from the past. For example, it seems to me to be quite legitimate to look at all the discoveries of science in the past few hundred years and to ask questions about what we believe: to ask if recent discoveries provide a challenge to what we believe. To be sure, this can at times be quite uncomfortable to do, a challenge for many believers, many Christians, in the last two centuries in particular.

- One question, relating to today's subject, for example, is whether or not, in the light of science, it is more or less likely than it used to be, that there's anything beyond the world we see or experience or can measure?
- Or to put it another way, perhaps more skeptically, there are lots of people (and perhaps you have been among them and are among them) who say *"Unless we can prove it, unless we can see it, unless we can demonstrate it with our own eyes then we dare not believe. We need to be agnostic about this. I may not be able to say 'No!' for sure, but I can say, 'I don't know' for sure."* There are millions of people out there, who because of what we hear about and think about science say, "You know, I'm just not sure about all these things!" Which for me means that it is really important, and perhaps especially on this Easter Sunday, for us to know that this is not the only way to think, the only modern way to think – with such skepticism – nor even the only scientific way to think about the world in which we live.

- Or let me put it this way: *There are some scientists, well-educated people, who know that “even though we know a lot” we also know that “there’s a lot that we don’t know about,” and we are willing to say that “while what we don’t know about is sometimes truly mysterious, yet it is still worth (humbly!) venturing into the unknown,” instead of simply ending the discussion at the limits of our (assured?) knowledge, with the dead end of “I think it’s only proper to remain agnostic”!*

Many of those scientists who think this way are those who try to get us to think about the existence of the whole universe within which we live our lives. So let me ask you this question: Have you ever heard that out there somewhere in fact way, way out there somewhere that many scientists believe that there is something called dark matter or dark energy? Somewhere out there, within and beyond what we can observe, dark matter and dark energy? [of course, I happen to believe that within and beyond the dark stuff, there may also be “bright” stuff – bright energy and matter!!] – and, what’s even more startling, to me at least, that these scientists believe that this dark energy and matter comprise 95% or more of what exists. This indicates that what we know is only a small fraction, $1/20^{\text{th}}$, of all that there is to know. Of course, if we don’t know everything about the 5% we can know about, then this fraction becomes even smaller! As the following article by NASA, puts it:

More is unknown than is known. We know how much dark energy there is because we know how it affects the Universe's expansion. Other than that, it is a complete mystery. But it is an important mystery.

<http://science.nasa.gov/astrophysics/focus-areas/what-is-dark-energy/>).

Ever since the Hubble telescope confirmed in 1998 that the universe was expanding more and more quickly, scientists have been working to understand why it is this way. Some have begun to “believe” (not an inconsequential word!) in some possible hypotheses.

One is that there are other dimensions to life “out there” (or in here?!) that we don’t know about, but which would help explain what’s going on.

The other hypothesis, embraced by the majority of scientists looking at this, is that 95% of the universe is made up of the dark matter and dark energy that I’ve mentioned – matter and energy that we can never see and can never measure.

Please let me be clear. I’m definitely not saying that this belief is casual or arbitrary. Indeed, I’m saying the opposite – that far from hiding behind the veil of “agnosticism,” scientists have deliberately chosen to penetrate the veil with humble yet rational belief! – a venturing into the unknown to find the best explanation for the known. The positing, believing and embracing of these explanations provides the very best present explanation for the 5% of the universe that we *can* see and that we *can* measure. The hypotheses about the 95% provides the very best explanation for that part of the universe, that tiny part of the universe, that we can see and we can observe and measure. It’s not “a mere” hypothesis or an irrational hypothesis; it’s a good and valuable one which may eventually help increase our understanding of and ability to know what

is presently unknown. It may or may not stand the test of time – but it is, nevertheless, a vital step into the mysterious unknown in order to make better sense of the known.

And for me, this has a great deal to do with my belief in the Resurrection of Jesus and its effects on early Christianity and on what happened on the days after Jesus' death on the cross. And not just on my belief but perhaps I trust on yours as well.

Nothing, nothing for me explains and this is how scientists work, explains the simple but unthinkable change of the Holy day given by God at the dawn of creation to another day, changed by people who had no authority whatsoever to mess with anything that grand – unless something happened of Earth-shaking, divinely creative proportions on a Sunday and not on a Saturday. That changed things forever.

Or perhaps even more consequential: Nothing better explains why Christianity itself was formed at that time and exists to this day, than that on the first Easter, the first Easter *Sunday*, and in the days that followed, those down to earth disciples who were not leaders but followers, people who wanted to run away because they were scared to death, saw something with their eyes that they could not deny, heard something with their ears that they could not ignore, and were invited to touch something with their hands that they recognized: Jesus! Dead, crucified, buried – but now raised back to life: in the body.

Seeing this changed everything.

- Changed their belief in God and it should change ours too. The God that we believe in is not just a God who is interested in things that are spiritual, but in the universe that God himself has made, in the materiality of the world, and in your life and in my life. When people speak of people as just “spirits” or “souls” don’t you cringe? We’re not just spirits or souls. We’re body, soul and spirits. God is interested in “us,” in us as we are, and always will be.
- It changes what we think about Jesus. A great teacher? Yes! Let’s listen to him now and again. Or, the teaching of the divine son of God, with a word for us, for which we were created and to which we must listen if we want life now and for all eternity the word of the divine Son of God.
- Or your life and mine. Go back to the universe. We’re just specks of cosmic dust, here for a cosmic second, unless the creator God deliberately created us in his image and has chosen to know us by name, and who, in raising Jesus up from the dead, says to us, “In due time, I will raise you up too!” Your mortal and immortal life is not insignificant to me. Indeed you will be who you are now and forever, loved by me, known by me, now and forever.

The Resurrection changed things back then. I’m convinced that it also does today. In fact I think it transforms everything – so that on this Easter Sunday, I hope and I pray that you will not only “just believe because you must,” but “believe because nothing makes more sense than that on that first Easter Sunday Jesus in the body rose from the dead.”

Let us bow before God in prayer, let us pray. Holy God fill us with awe and wonder that you should notice us and know us and love us enough to send Jesus for us and to call us through his

life and death into eternal fellowship with you. May we find in you the lover of our souls for whom our souls and our bodies all of us crave and for whom we were made. So bless us and make us a blessing to this world which you love this day and always, amen.

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