

DO YOU BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION?

Acts 10: 34-43; John 20: 1-18

Do you believe in the resurrection? On this Easter Sunday, it's a good question to ponder. Do you believe in the resurrection?

Well, preacher, what do you mean by the resurrection? It may seem obvious. Our gospel account is high tension drama. Mary, Peter and another disciple are running. Mary starts the running once she comes to the tomb and sees the stone covering it rolled away. She runs to find Peter and the other disciple and tells them what she's seen. Then all three run back to the tomb to see for themselves. Peter and the other disciple go in. What do they see? They see the linen wrappings that had covered Jesus body there, but there's no body. What could this mean?

For Mary, it couldn't mean anything good. Someone must have taken the body. Her last act of love for her Lord and friend would have been to anoint the body with spices for final burial. With no body, how could she do this? But then, the astonishingly miraculous happens. Two angel-like figures appear to her. They ask her why she's weeping. She tells them. But even as she's speaking, she turns around to see Jesus there. She doesn't recognize him. He must have looked very different than the bloodied, mutilated corpse they had taken down from the cross. He must have also looked different because she could not imagine that the man standing there could possibly be Jesus.

But it is Jesus. She only recognizes him when he speaks her name in a way that is personal. She falls to her knees. Jesus then offers her words of assurance. He also tells her to go tell the others what she has seen.

Now, it may seem obvious what believing in the resurrection is all about. It's about believing that the Jesus who was killed in a horrible way has come to life again. It's believing that death does not have to be terminal. There is new life beyond death.

But what kind of life are we talking about? Is it just physical life? If all we had about the resurrection was a resurrection of our bodies, that would be amazing for sure. It is

miraculous if one could believe such things. But will it change your life? Will it change the world around you? It will definitely give you something to talk about. "Isn't it something that dead people can come back to life again!" But if that's all the resurrection was, there would be no Christianity. There would be no change or transformation. The body is part of a much larger and more profound reality. It's about mind, heart and spirit, not just body. Jesus' resurrection was about much more than just meeting Jesus physically alive again.

So, what is this something more? Here now is where it gets even more fascinating. For the earliest followers of Jesus, the resurrection was not just about what could happen to dead bodies. The resurrection was an act of God that vindicated Jesus as victor over all kinds of evil and destructive powers that hurt and destroy life. Jesus' resurrection means that no amount of evil can destroy God's vision for human life. If and when people are empowered to believe in the resurrection transformation happens.

OK. Preacher. What do you mean by transformation? Let me start by giving some content, then I will give an example. What kind of transformation is resurrection? In our second reading from Acts, the same Peter who runs in bewilderment and confusion in our gospel reading, the same Peter who denies he even knows Jesus because he's afraid... this same Peter is now, several months later, preaching boldly in public about Jesus. How did this change in Peter happen? What did it mean? Peter tells the crowd gathered what it means. He tells them that even though they supported the way of violence and injustice that crucified an innocent man, Jesus preached peace. Jesus went about doing good and healing people. The people followed their leaders in rejecting Jesus' vision of peace, healing and compassion. They chose the way of hate and violence and had him brutally tortured and killed.

But here's where it gets fascinating. Even though they thought that killing Jesus would be the end of him and the end of whatever movement he was trying to start, the opposite has happened. It's like his death lit a match and fired up the movement like nothing else. What did it? Peter proclaims that Jesus was raised and it is he, Jesus, who has commissioned Peter and the others to spread his message of peace, healing and compassion. But there's more. Peter says that the spiritual meaning of the resurrection is this: No amount of evil and injustice, no amount of brutal power and force, nothing, can destroy Jesus' power to create new life.

The reason for this power is that Jesus also preached forgiveness from the very cross he was crucified. You meant to destroy him. He responded with forgiveness. His way of love will not be destroyed by the poison of hate. It will rise up and transform any heart which opens to him. Only forgiveness opens up peace in a world of wicked violence. Only forgiveness can change hate into openness. Only forgiveness can heal bitterness and despair. Forgiveness builds bridges and creates openings. 'You can walk through that door right now and be changed like we are being changed,' Peter tells the crowd. 'Join us and be transformed.' It's possible. It's real.

That's the resurrection message. The crucified Christ forgives and by forgiving his message of peace, healing and compassion becomes even more transformational.

OK preacher. I understand the words. But what does this look like in real life. Let me tell a story, a true story.

Wilma Derkson used to have revenge fantasies about what she would do to predators like the one who kidnapped and killed her 13-yr-old daughter Candace. Candace disappeared while walking home from school Nov. 30, 1984, in Winnipeg, and she was found dead nearly seven weeks later, frozen in a remote shed near her home. She had been abducted by a stranger.

Candace disappeared on a Friday. She had been looking forward to having her good friend from summer camp come over for a sleepover. She called her mother at 3:30pm and asked to be picked up from school. Candace hoped to get home faster, and hoped she and her mom could buy goodies for the sleepover on the way home.

It was winter, and Wilma was busy. She had to take care of Candace's younger siblings. So, Wilma told Candace to take the bus home. Candace opted to walk the 25 minutes to her house, just across the river from Winnipeg's downtown. She'd done this before so there was nothing unusual. But Candace never made it home.

For years after, Wilma and her husband Cliff struggled with guilt. Intimacy was difficult for them both. Wilma blamed sex and men for Candace's disappearance and death. Over the years the couple never sought therapy. They could not afford it. They relied on friends and especially their church community. The theme that kept coming up again and again was forgiveness.

13 years after the murder, Wilma attended a conference where the main topic was learning to forgive. There were no 'Aha' moments for her at the conference. But during a taxi ride to the airport, a cabbie described forgiveness to her with an eloquence she'd never heard. He described forgiveness as: "the beauty of being set free, letting go of the past, embracing the present moment and anticipating the future..."

Since that time, Derkson has become an author, and more recently, published her 6th book entitled: *The Way of Letting Go*. The book explores forgiveness as an ongoing quest to let go of the past and move into the future. In the book, she writes about having revenge fantasies like one where she imagines 10 child murderers lined up – their faces covered with hoods – as she aims a gun at them and pulls the trigger. But as the bullets fly and the hoods are removed, she sees the dead men's families carrying the shame and grief, a grief she can relate to as she mourns the loss of Candace.

Derkson also writes that we never finish forgiveness. It's an impossibility to say I have ever forgiven completely. "We have to wash ourselves everyday to stay clean," she writes. "Forgiveness is a washing of the spirit every day."

And Derkson is not just a writer. She is an activist too. She visits prisons and speaks to inmates about anger, guilt and forgiveness. She is an advocate for treatment-based approach where difficult-to-cure inmates are overseen by specialists in psychiatry and psychology rather than a punishment-based model alone, where the only supervision is by jail guards. She says that this only creates more anger and hopelessness in inmates, not positive change.

Derkson is also an activist for victims and their families. A movement has been underway in Winnipeg to build Candace House, a non-profit charity and facility that would provide a quiet, private space where family members of crime victims can retreat during trials...

For Derkson, it is the risen Christ who has been with her all the way... through her anger and hate, but also through the constant transformation in her heart energizing her to be an agent of transformation in the world around her... This is the message and the power of the resurrection. And it is something that can begin here and now when we embrace it as our vision and our way...

But whether we've been through something traumatic or fearful like Derkson, or whether there are any number of reasons why we struggle to love inside us, on this Easter Sunday, we are challenged to open our hearts and spirits anew not only to the miracle of physical resurrection, but to the powerful reality of spiritual resurrection here and now. Like Peter living and preaching the forgiveness he experienced after he betrayed and abandoned his Lord... like the bewildered and confused disciples of Jesus who were so caught up in their fear they could not fathom any way forward... we too need to encounter the risen Christ in a transformational way, again and again as life happens and change comes on our journey... We need to meet the risen Christ just like Mary did... We need the Spirit of the risen Christ to open up new ways for us like Wilma Derkson found...

May we open ourselves anew... may we see and feel and understand... May we follow the risen Christ calling to each of us wherever we are right now at this time of our lives... Amen.