

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES EASTER MAKE?

John 20: 19-31; Luke 16: 19-31

What an experience! The disciples are in hiding. They're traumatized and scared. They witnessed it all - what happened to Jesus was horrific! And they were his disciples. Wouldn't the authorities come looking for them next? But somehow, don't ask me how, Jesus appears among them. It must be a ghost. It must be minds playing tricks on them. It must be their wild imaginations. But they all witness the same thing. And somehow, Jesus proves it's him. He shows them his hands where the nails were hammered in, and his side where a spear pierced him to make sure he was dead at the end. How is it possible he's alive? There's no rational explanation.

So what does Jesus do besides shock the heck out of them? Well, he reassures them, repeatedly: 'Peace be with you,' He says. He needs to say it because the last thing they're feeling right now is peace. But he says other things to them also. He gives them a new purpose: 'As the Father has sent me, so I send you.' He also breathes into them his Spirit to empower them. Finally, he gives them new authority: the authority to forgive people and to hold them accountable to a higher justice as emissaries of Jesus. Wow! What an experience! But how can this be? How can they make sense of it all? I don't know.

But then there's Thomas. He's not there when all this happens. And so, as soon as he arrives, they tell him: 'Jesus is alive and we have seen him! He was here! It really was him!' Now If you were Thomas, how would you respond? Well, Thomas is very rational. 'Unless I see for myself,' he says, 'and unless I touch Jesus, especially his hands where the nails went in and his side where the spear pierced him, I will not believe.' I would respond exactly like Thomas did. Something impossible doesn't become possible just because people tell you it is. Even if the witnesses are reliable, they've been through hell and back. All of them have. Hallucinations are not out of the question. Unless you can see, touch, hear, smell and taste for yourself, how do you know any of it is real?

Well, the story continues. We're told that on another day when Thomas is at the house, Jesus somehow appears again. He offers them the same reassuring words of peace. And even though he wasn't physically there when Thomas questioned the disciples' testimony the week before, he somehow knows that Thomas needs his own evidence to believe. He needs to see, touch and hear Jesus for himself. And so, Jesus addresses Thomas directly: 'look at me, Thomas,' he says. 'feel my scars. It really is me.'

Thomas, we're told, is not only convinced. He is overwhelmed with astonishment. Jesus has opened a door to a whole new reality. He has powers of being that they never fathomed he had. Thomas is in the presence of transcendence, a different dimension of reality: 'My Lord and my God!' he says. What else can he say? But Jesus has the final word. He says to Thomas: 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

Well, OK Jesus, but what do you mean by believing? Is it a matter of believing something is possible that we've always thought impossible? Is it about believing that you are fully alive and well and able to move here, there and everywhere even though you were executed in the most brutal way just days and weeks ago? Is that what it means to believe? No. According to the gospels, faith is not primarily an intellectual thing. It's not about believing something against all reason. No. Faith is actually about changing your life. If you really believe something it changes you. If all you claim to believe is that Jesus was raised from the dead, so what. It's not enough. Only if claiming to believe Jesus was raised from the dead has changed your life in some decisive way in terms of your life-direction, purpose, commitments and values... only then is faith in the resurrection something of substance. You can believe something with your mind and still be the same person the next day. But if you believe something with your heart and all that it means, it can and should transform you. If it doesn't change your life how can faith be really real? Unless Thomas is changed in his whole life passion and direction, what difference does believing something is real in itself make?

And this point is brought out powerfully in our second reading from the gospel. Jesus tells a story. It's not a literal story but more like a fable. The point of the story though is very real. There is a rich man. How do we know he's rich? He's got a big house with a gate, he dresses in expensive clothes and he feasts on rich food every day. He also lives in a time and place where taxes are super low – just enough to keep the army well paid and the prisons well built. But no social programs, no pensions or unions or hospitals or shelters or foodbanks or libraries or nothing. And so, there's a poor man just outside the rich man's gate. Why is he there? Well, if he's going to get anything to survive he can only get it from someone who has money. His name is Lazarus, meaning, 'God is my help.' God has to be his help because the rich man doesn't even notice him let alone give him anything.

Well, we're told that both Lazarus and the rich man die. The problem is, the rich man ends up in Hades where he is tormented, while Lazarus is experiencing comfort in heaven like he never experienced in the world. All he experienced in the world was hell because of the vast inequality between the 2% wealthy and the 98% poor with no middle class in-between. OK. now here's where the story really gets interesting. The rich man is suffering great agony. He wants some relief. Can't Lazarus give him even a drop of water to cool his parched tongue?

It's not possible, he's told. It's too late. All opportunity to do any good with his life evaporated when he breathed his last.

But then, the rich man asks something else. Maybe Lazarus can go back to earth to warn the rest of his family. They're all super wealthy too and they're all as oblivious to the crying need around them as he was. Maybe if they're warned, they'll smarten up before it's too late for them. But father Abraham the great patriarch who is comforting Lazarus, says this in response: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets while they are alive on earth, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

In other words, Moses and the prophets taught all the people that love of God and neighbour go together. You can't claim to love God if you neglect your neighbour. Care for your neighbour in a tangible, meaningful way is the substance of love for God as well. If they have ignored all this in their lifestyle, their life goals and priorities, their passions and desires... if all of their life-focus and preoccupation is themselves totally oblivious of the crying need all around them, what difference will it make if someone like Lazarus or even Jesus rises from the dead to warn them?

Well, you may be thinking, it will make a difference. If someone you knew died and rose again from the dead, wouldn't that make you believe the resurrection? But we're missing the point of the story. Faith without change is meaningless and empty. Just believing something happens doesn't translate into following everything the person demands we do and live. If we come to believe Jesus is resurrected, will we better follow him? Let me provide an illustration.

There are dozens of new scientific studies coming out about the connection between spirituality, religious participation and health. According to collated research of the past 20 years: The overwhelming evidence is pointing to the conclusion that there are significant positive health outcomes linked to increased spirituality and religious participation. Some of the studies are specific to spirituality and aging while others focus on the link between physical health, mental health and spiritual health. They work with diverse populations in more prosperous parts of the world and they document health over a long period of time and through various medical conditions, treatments and surgical outcomes.

Physical health includes conditions like heart disease, cancer and dementia. Mental health conditions include anxiety and depression. Studies have also focussed on both individual spiritual development and group participation. Loneliness is a big focal point of another set of studies and I'm sure many of us have heard about some of this in our news. The alternative to loneliness is not about being around more people. It's about whether we connect meaningfully and profoundly with other people. What group settings provide opportunity and encouragement for deeper, richer fellowship where faith, hope and love

are prioritized and valued above all? What group settings provide incentives for care and compassion to be valued as the highest values. What group settings provide rituals where the liberating release of confession is encouraged, the inner healing of forgiveness and letting go is given language, thanksgiving as a sacred inner expression is voiced, and a prayerful concern for the world beyond oneself is opened up? There is proven therapeutic benefits to all of this long-term including the building of inner strength for coping, speedier recovery after illness, better healing outcomes, and the development of greater happiness because of the discovery of meaning and connection after loss and major life-change. The more scientific research is being published, the more the evidence is rock-solid.

But let me ask you all: is this scientific evidence surprising to you? Is it a surprise that worship and prayer, inner spiritual development, contemplation and the increase in our overall mental and physical health are connected? I bet we all know this even though we live in a world where scientific evidence gives an authority to our personal knowledge and intuition we would not trust the same otherwise.

But here's the thing. Will it make a difference? A number of the studies recognize that even though there is rock-solid evidence coming out every day about the multiple benefits to health and well-being of spirituality and religious participation, secularization has continued apace in our western European and North American context, and the further north you go and the further urbanized the context, the greater the secularization. What's going on here? Are people suicidal, ignoring what's clearly good for their overall health? Will more people be convinced to take up spiritual practices and participation in church? Well, it's like climate change, or like the rich man in the story Jesus tells, or like believing in the resurrection. There's denial. That's one way of coping with reality. There's also believing it's real. But changing behaviour, transforming our values and beliefs into life-style, commitments, practices and relationships... That's a whole other matter.

Faith is not just an idea or belief devoid of practice. If it's really real, it has to change something substantial in you and me. The problem is, faith is not something we can just buy or turn on like a light-bulb even when we're convinced it's a good idea. We need to cultivate the ground in our hearts for faith to take root. We need to expose ourselves to places and spaces where the seed may be planted and growth inspired, places and spaces like we're in right here and now. Jesus is risen and alive. He is on the move. His Spirit is everywhere seeking to resurrect faith, hope and love. God knows our world needs lots more of it. Our health and well-being need more of it. But as Jesus asks more than once in the gospel stories: When the Son of Man returns in the flesh, will he find faith on earth?

“If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Are you convinced by Jesus' resurrection? Do you believe? What difference does faith in the resurrection make in your life? Amen.