

The Risen Christ

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Margot D Critchfield
St Stephen's Church--Cohasset, Massachusetts
Easter Sunday 2008
Matthew 28: 1-10

Isn't Easter great? We made it through another year, another winter, another Lent. And this morning's gospel story is great, too: The drama of an earthquake, an angel appearing like lightening to reveal an empty tomb, and the two Mary's meeting the risen Christ, clutching his feet, and worshipping him! Mel Gibson eat your heart out!

But how many of us really believe this story? Here it is Easter, and we're all here to celebrate the day of our Lord's resurrection. Do we really believe that Jesus was resurrected? After all, this is the Episcopal Church—the one that prides itself on not having to check your brain at the door. We don't take everything the Bible says literally—we appreciate its social and historical context, its rich engagement with literary illusions, myths and metaphors. Do we really have to believe such an un-believable story? Well, no—we don't.

But let me tell you another story. It's one that Phyllis Tickle, the author and former religion editor at *Publisher's Weekly* told at a Lenten workshop she led at my parish in Washington.

As Phyllis tells it, she was leading a workshop at another Episcopal Church, and at one point the conversation got rather heated around the subject of the Virgin Birth. Did it really happen or could it be interpreted metaphorically? Like almost any gathering of Episcopalians, this one included a diverse group of folks, each of whom read the story through a different intellectual lens: historical, biological, theological, literary. When the event was over, and everyone was lining up for Phyllis to sign books, a teen-age boy waiting in line caught Phyllis' attention. When it finally got around to his turn, the young man said, "Ma'am, I don't have a book for you to sign, I just have to ask you a question." "Well, sure," she said, "what is it?" "It's about the Virgin Birth," said the teenager, "I just don't understand." "Well, what is it exactly that you don't understand?" Phyllis asked. And the young man answered, "I just don't understand why all the adults are arguing about the Virgin Birth. It's such

a beautiful story it has to be true whether it happened or not." *It's such a beautiful story, it has to be true whether it happened or not.* Isn't that wonderful?

Now what that little gem of a post-modern story tells me is that it's time for us to expand our self-identity as the Episcopal Church. And I figure this Easter, right here at St Stephen's, is the perfect time to do it. It's great that we don't have to check our brains at the door to be Episcopalians, but I'd like to declare here and now that we don't have to check our hearts there either. Because as Pascal so famously put it, "The heart has reasons that reason can never know." Or as my father used to remind me, quoting Hamlet, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than ever dreamt of in your philosophy." More things, I might add, than ever dreamt of in our post-enlightenment interpretation of reality, so strictly defined by scientific rationalism.

So no, we don't have to believe in resurrection in the Episcopal Church. A lot of faithful Episcopalians don't—at least they don't believe in *bodily* resurrection. A lot of people prefer to think about the resurrection metaphorically, like Marcus Borg, the progressive Episcopal theologian who led a Diocesan learning event last Saturday in Boston.

But since this is my first Easter with you, I think it's important for me to come right out and tell you from the get-go that *this* progressive Episcopalian actually believes in bodily resurrection. Yes, I know I'm probably in the minority here, but there you have it. I believe Jesus really was raised from the dead. Not some sort of resuscitated corpse—I don't mean that. But I don't mean a disembodied spirit, or mass hallucination either. I mean raised with some sort of definitively physical body the likes of which we simply can't imagine. The kind of body with feet you can grab onto, like the two Marys did in today's gospel. But the kind of body about which we know nothing at this point in human history---and for which medical science has absolutely no evidence. In other words, the kind of physical

body that remains a total mystery to our limited understanding.

And I'm okay with that. I love that we can't understand or explain it. God's bigger than we are, and what a delight that is! Do you really want a God you can comprehend? A God small enough for our puny little brains to understand and our science to measure? Not me!

Now, unfortunately, I couldn't go to the Marcus Borg event last weekend--maybe some of you did—but I once had the pleasure of meeting Borg at a clergy conference in Washington. I got to tell him how much I admire his work, but that he always loses me with his metaphorical interpretation of the resurrection. Borg just looked at me and said, "Why does the tomb have to be empty?" I was so dumbfounded, all I could say was, "If the tomb's not empty, what's the point?"

That's what it really comes down to for me. You see, the tomb being empty on Easter morning is at the very heart of my faith. I know that's not the case for everyone, and *that really is okay*. But the way I see it, Jesus died because of our ferocious capacity for doing evil—a capacity for doing evil that's still with us, graphically recorded in our newspapers day after day.

But because the tomb is empty, God's love has proven once and for all to be more powerful than any death-dealing evil of which we are capable. Because the tomb is empty, I know that the forces of violence, hate and death will never have the final word in this broken world of ours. Because the tomb is empty, I know that that battle's already been won, and that Jesus didn't just out-do death, he un-did it. And that means that all of our deaths—whether spiritual, emotional, intellectual, or even physical, have value they would not otherwise have. All of our deepest pain and most anguished suffering can be redeemed, and made meaningful. Nothing is beyond the transforming power of the risen Christ. Not death, not loneliness, not grief, not illness, not addiction; not suffering, not rejection, not anguish, not humiliation. There is nothing---nothing---that cannot be transformed into a source of new life by the same Divine Love that raised Christ from the dead.

Now, I don't expect to convince anyone here to believe in bodily resurrection. Until a couple of years ago I didn't think such a thing was even possible. Then another Anglican theologian, NT

Wright, proved me wrong. I used to lead a book group of the most fabulously faithful skeptics you'd ever want to meet, and they decided they wanted to tackle Wright's 816-page book on the Resurrection. We spent *months* on it. And much to my total shock the three most serious skeptics in that group became avid believers in bodily resurrection. Frankly, it still mystifies me since I got there by way of my heart rather than my head, but Wright obviously makes a very convincing *intellectual* argument for Christ's bodily resurrection. So if you're into that sort of insanely well-researched and logical argument, I commend to you NT Wright.

But since I'm obviously no NT Wright, I'm not going to try to convince you to believe what I believe. Like the young man in Phyllis Tickle's story said about the virgin birth, I think the Resurrection is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it happened or not.

And I *choose* to believe that it happened. I choose to believe in both the experience and the event of resurrection. I've been privileged to witness resurrection in so many peoples' lives — folks for whom light overcame dark, hope overcame despair, and new life came out of suffering. And I've experienced such profound resurrections in my own life... how could I *not* believe in resurrection? Resurrection gives me perspective. Resurrection gives me hope. With resurrection eyes I see beyond my own small world and catch a glimpse of God's.

To me the really inexplicable mystery about Christ's resurrection is our participation in it through baptism and Eucharist. In our baptism into Christ's dying and rising we, too, pass over death into new life. We're marked as Christ's own forever, and nothing—not even the powers of death and evil---can undo that. And in our celebration of the Eucharist, we remember our story as God's people—who we are and where we came from. We remember the suffering and death that our Lord underwent before rising to new and transformed life. Then we're strengthened to live this new life ourselves—by him and with him and in him, as an Easter people, a people of hope.

So here it is Easter, and we're all here to celebrate the day of our Lord's resurrection. We're each invited to do that in whatever way feels most appropriate for us, wherever we are on our faith journey. That's especially important here, in the Episcopal Church—where we pride

ourselves on not having to check our brains at the door. So please know that you don't *have* to believe, like I do, in the bodily Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

But please know, too, that you can--that you don't have to check your heart at the door anymore than your brain. That you can move beyond the confines of scientific rationalism. That you can *choose* to believe in bodily resurrection, simply because in the deepest recesses of your being, where you sometimes feel God gently touching your soul, you hear a still small voice whispering, "It's just so beautiful, it has to be true!"
Amen.