

Easter for Skeptics

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The First Congregational Church of Burlington, United Church of Christ
Burlington, Vermont

Luke 24: 1 to 12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. 2They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, 3but when they went in, they did not find the body. 4While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. 5The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. 6Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, 7that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." 8Then they remembered his words, 9and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. 10Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. 11But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. 12But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

A prefatory remark. I am pleased to report that the gold fish have reappeared in the pond behind our home as have two Mallard ducks, a beautiful drake and a hen. I also give thanks that the turtle, Lou, is back after spending the winter buried in his tomb of cold mud. I am delighted to say that life abounds on Easter day. There is life all around.

Now this morning, I would like to preach on the subject: Easter for skeptics. Easter for skeptics. My topic in part is inspired by a recent article in Seven Days which led with the headline "Are you there God, it's me Vermont. Finding Religion in the Most Godless state in the Union." The article went on to profile nine faith communities to show that religion was in fact alive and well in the Green Mountain state. While there were things which were good about the article I confess that I grimaced a bit because they did not profile the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church or any other mainline protestant church with the exception of a very nice profile of a local Mennonite church.

Well I take that back. There was in fact one reference to the United Church of Christ where they reported that a certain Senior Minister from First Congregational Church, who recently preached at Ohavi Zedick Synagogue, offered some good words and praised Rabbi Chasan for his prophetic witness, but that this minister struggled to keep his yarmulke on. Well my wife said: "what do you expect from a man of good northern Irish stock with a big head?" Just so you know when presented with a yarmulke in the Rabbis office I was given a choice of bobby pins or a hair clip to secure the maroon suede Yamulka I selected. I opted for

the hair clip, thinking it looked a little more fashion forward. Next time, however, I will stick with the bobby pins.

But apart from the optics which did not work the best, I want you to know how incredibly gracious everyone was at Ohavi Zeddick. The willingness that these people had to reach across the religious divide was quite amazing to me. Make no mistake, God was deeply present in the hospitality shown, as we gathered for the three hours to pray and sing together as the beautiful sun light refracted through the clear etched glass which surround the top perimeter of the walls. On Shabbat, our friends at Ohavi Zeddick offered to their guests and the world a wonderful picture of new life.

Ohavi Zeddick is another word for justice. Honoring their name sake, I reflected on the passage from Deuteronomy which speaks of how the timeless commandments offered life pointing us to the one true God. I also said that religious communities at their best, teach the truths of God to their children, and bring people together across the generations to convey the faith. But I also spent some time acknowledging that for so many people, religious institutions can seem more death dealing than life giving. People have good reason to be skeptical of religious institutions. People tire from listening to religious platitudes which ring hollow. So often the faithful eliminate the surprise, humanity and mystery out of their religious stories. Such reductionism can lead people to lose heart and think there is nothing new to learn. Religion can feel dry, static, boring and oppressive. Instead of liberating the human spirit, religion can squash it. Religious institutions can contort their sacred texts to become cheerleaders for war while discriminating against other people and blessing hostility toward women, the aged, the poor, people of different races or religions and those of different sexual orientations. Sometimes, I feel Jesus would hardly recognize what passes for Christianity in our time.

What we forget, however, is that authentic faith is rooted in a very healthy skepticism. When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women went to the tomb to bring spices for Jesus' body, they did not show up clutching a perfect doctrinal statement on the resurrection. Instead, they came to the tomb with incredible pain in their heart. Amidst their pain, they were perplexed. Very perplexed that the stone had rolled away and the body was gone. When two men appeared in white, it says that they were terrified. Why is it, the men asked the women, are you looking for the living among the dead? It took a lot of work for these two men to remind the jaded and grief struck women about what Jesus said that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again. These women were skeptics of the first order. Who would not be? But after the women got over some of their skepticism to see the reality of the resurrection, they came to the apostles to tell them what they had seen. But guess what, the apostles were also skeptical. The apostles said that the women were telling an "idle tale, and that they did not believe them." The apostles thought the women were delusional. It's understandable the apostles were skeptical for they too had lost heart and grown cynical around the circumstances of Jesus' death. The violence, hypocrisy, and the discrimination the apostles witnessed, even among themselves, made it nearly impossible for them to conceive how it could be that Jesus had risen. Their imaginations were deeply wounded. It was only later when Peter stole away from the clamor,

and came to the empty tomb, to take a second look and saw the linen clothes, that he was amazed and thought the resurrection seemed plausible.

If we take the resurrection account in Luke's Gospel account seriously, we learn that skepticism is not the enemy of faith. To the contrary, skepticism is intrinsic to faith. Faith, after all, isn't knowledge. Rather, faith, as the author to the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). So perhaps in Vermont, which is so carelessly labeled the most godless state in the union, might not be so godless after all. Maybe the resurrection surprise is that, in fact, Vermonters have a deep faith in God which is why so many of us resist making God too small so as to be contained in some narrow religious category. If the resurrection means anything at all, it means busting up the nasty labels and stereotypes we put on another which can be so death dealing and led to the crucifixion in the first place. Instead, our skeptical faith points us to the overwhelming power of life offered to all of creation by the risen Christ.

Where is it that we see the signs of new life? A number of years ago, in Chicago, a story circulated about a very sad happening which took place at the official residence of Cardinal Joseph Bernardine. For a number of years, it would seem on the front lawn of the diocesan residence, there was a small colony of rabbits which loved to play there. The neighborhood children loved to come onto the diocesan grounds to play with the rabbits. There was one rabbit, in particular, that the children loved named Flopsy. Cardinal Bernardine, during his walks, loved to come down and to speak with the children and play with the rabbits. One day, however, there was a tragedy. One morning, when the children came to play, they found that Flopsy had died. And the children were visibly shaken and in grief. So upon spotting the tearful children, the Cardinal came down to console the children. He comforted them. And then the Cardinal gathered the children around to give Flopsy a proper burial. He conducted a little funeral to give thanks for Flopsy and the joy and life this beloved rabbit brought to the children. For the children the Cardinal offered a consolation, kindness, and the promise of new life in the face of death. I am sure there were traditionalist Roman Catholics who objected to the Cardinal performing last rights for a rabbit. It's not in the prayer book you know. But the Cardinal did not care, because the pastoral needs of those kids were more important.

Breaking the rules in Christ's name is what religious people are called to do some times. In Middle Ages, it was St. Francis, who disavowed the wealth of his father, and took a vow of poverty to help the poor. More recently, the new pope Francis, taking St. Francis' name, passed up going to a fancy basilica on Maundy Thursday to wash the feet of 12 priests. Instead, Pope Francis headed to a jail for juveniles, where he washed and kissed the feet of 12 young people including two women, — a Serbian Muslim and an Italian Catholic. Some Roman Catholic traditionalists went a little nuts. Edward Peters, a blogger and expert in church law at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit, wrote on his blog that "'Pope Francis was setting a 'questionable example.'" A 1988 letter from the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship states that only "chosen men" can be admitted to the foot-washing ceremony.'" Pope Francis, however, has stood firm, offering the picture of resurrection life in the face of death. He recently said: "We need to avoid the spiritual sickness of a church that is wrapped up in its own world: when a church becomes like this, it grows sick. It is true that

going out on to the street implies the risk of accidents happening, as they would to any ordinary man or woman. But if the church stays wrapped up in itself, it will age. And if I had to choose between a wounded church that goes out on to the streets and a sick, withdrawn church, I would definitely choose the first one.” How refreshing.

So, I wish to say that the resurrection shows itself in many different ways. No matter whether you are a traditionalist and a defender of the faith, a deep skeptic, a conservative or a liberal, a spiritualist or a fearless secularist, I want us all to know that the resurrection of Jesus is offered to all of us. The resurrection is not opposed to diversity—it embraces it and God loves us all--- I mean all of us. All of us, whether we are a Christian or not or whether we are not sure what we are or what believe, participate in the radical loving embrace of the risen Christ. In Christ love wins—always. And if love wins, the resurrection invites us to get beyond the categories we put each other in and invites us to see the surprising promise of new life offered all around in every form. When the resurrection is true, Cardinals say prayers for rabbits to console grieving children, Popes wash and kiss the feet of young prisoners. Faithful Christians reach out to the poor. Jews offer an uncommon hospitality to Christians, Christians speak out against anti-Semitism and discrimination in all its forms, Jews, Christians, and Muslims offer generosity of spirit to one another, and vibrant faith communities do not condemn seekers and skeptics but embrace them and help them see that their questions don’t destroy the church, but are in fact the life blood of faith.

Wherever you are in life’s journey, allow the amazing joy and power of the risen Christ to have his way with you. For Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.