

**Sermon: The Real Resurrection**  
**Scripture: John 20:19-31**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: May 1, 2011**

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And now we are in the days of the resurrection. I don't mean that we are now in these days after last week's Easter celebration remembering Jesus' resurrection appearances that occurred 2000 years ago but rather we are living in the days of the resurrection of Jesus having happened and the rest of the story happening even now reaching toward some fulfillment in the future. There is this resurrection "pull" or undertow taking place in our lives now. Do you know that incredible feeling of standing with your feet in the sand as the water from the previous wave rushes out past you and if you are out far enough you could even lose your footing as you are drawn out there into that vast ocean. It's not a bad image for the resurrection of Jesus having crashed over the world and then sucking, drawing, pulling all creation out into that New Creation that is coming, that is arriving, not to replace the old but to renew it.

We've got to talk in such global or cosmic terms to reference what the New Testament means when it refers to the resurrection. The New Testament goes out of its way to make it clear in the resurrection accounts that it wasn't Jesus appearing as a ghost or ethereal spirit to his disciples. This would have been scary and unusual but not a new thing. In the ancient world as well as today there are those who have experienced ghosts, some presence that seems stuck somewhere between the material world and the spirit world. Remember Peter's first thought out in the boat when he saw Jesus walking on water – it's a ghost! The writers of the New Testament would know how to describe an experience that would be understood as a ghost sighting and this is decidedly not what they did. When Mary Magdalene grabs hold of Jesus' resurrected body he tells her to let go of him for he has not yet ascended to the father. And on the beach when he appears to the disciples he eats fish with them. He walks the road to Emmaus and breaks bread with others. And then the passage of doubting Thomas that Margaret read today also makes it clear that that Thomas could touch Jesus' resurrected body. He actually touches his wounded hands and puts his finger into the wound in his side. The resurrection is not a ghost story.

Such passage also make it clear that the resurrection is not some intra-psychic experience that has no reality in the outside external world. It can't be dismissed as hallucination on the part of a few crazy Jesus followers who were stricken with grief over their Lord's execution, for Jesus appeared over a five or six week time period to over 500 people. When Paul is writing his letter to the Corinthians around what scholars believe to be the year 55 of the common era he refers his reader to these 500 people still living at that time who experienced the resurrected Christ and can bare witness to its being a real event in real time.

So it's not a ghost story nor an intra-psychic experience, according to the writers of the New Testament. But the resurrection is also NOT a couple of other things that we might be tempted to suggest it is. It's not an affirmation of the immortality of the soul. The resurrection as described by the writers of the Gospel and the Apostle Paul, himself a witness to the resurrected Christ, doesn't appear to be making the point that once your body dies your soul continues to live on, much less does it say that that disembodied soul flies up to heaven or falls into hell. For some reason Christians want to make it all about personal individual salvation and while there certainly is reference to the afterlife and heaven and hell and personal salvation, it really isn't the main point. Again, clearly in the resurrection accounts, Jesus is not a disembodied spirit floating off to heaven and awaiting others to follow. This also would not be all that new of a thing for there were accounts of this throughout the ancient world, this dualism between the material and spiritual world and the claim that at the end of life the physical body goes back to the earth and the spirit-body floats into the afterlife. The New Testament does not suggest that Jesus resurrection was simply a confirmation of this notion. It's much more radical than that.

But before we get to what it IS, according to the scripture, let me suggest one more thing that the resurrection is not and that is metaphorical. The writers of the New Testament were NOT using metaphorical language when they described the resurrection appearances. They were by no means unfamiliar with metaphorical language. When the Gospel of John has one of the disciples call after Jesus "here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" the writer was thinking nor having his character claim that Jesus was a little lamb walking around saying "baa, baa". They were speaking

metaphorically. And yet when they described Jesus' resurrection and spoke of his coming to them so that they could actually see him and touch him and eat with him they were quite obviously using language that was meant to be literal. They were writing about a very real experience with the resurrected Christ. If they were meaning it metaphorically they would have approached it in a very different way.

So then if the resurrection is not a ghost story, nor a mass intra-psyche hallucination, nor an account of what happens to the soul after death, nor even a metaphor for the natural processes of life coming out of death and love conquering hate, then what in the world is this resurrection Easter thing all about?

Well, once we clear away those misconceptions and simplistic understandings of what the New Testament is trying to convey, we'll find ourselves pretty quickly in deep water, responding to this undertow that I was initially talking about, responding to something happening to us, for the New Testament proclamation that Christ refers to a completely new thing that has never ever happened before and that is this actual material rising of Jesus himself as a renewed reality, as a renewed creation. The belief is that creation itself, though a creation of God's and beloved by God, is corrupted and corrupting, which by the way is an assessment that the scientific world agrees with, right, that ever since the Big Bang the universe is degrading and dissipating and disorganizing. However, such corruption of creation is not in God's overarching plan and purpose for the world, but it will be renewed finally and the resurrected Jesus is the foreshadowing or the first fruit of this renewal, a fulfillment in human form of creation as it should be... as it will be in fact one day.... The resurrection is not some personal pronouncement of the individual soul's salvation, but much more radically it's a cosmic pronouncement of creation's salvation! It's a radical claim that creation herself is not winding down towards her ultimate demise but will be reconstituted towards it's ultimate fulfillment and perfection. That's the promise that the resurrection secures for us.

Now what does that mean for us? THAT is a good question! That is THE question in fact, the guiding question to put at the very center of our individual lives and corporate life as a community. We've been reading in our study groups Changing the Conversation and Robinson refers to the importance of finding that center upon which everything else in our communal life must arise, and its right here, I would suggest, that

we are touching on that center. It's right here in the resurrection and the renewal of creation that our uniquely Christian identity is rooted and out of which our decisions must be made and our future plotted.

If Jesus Risen is the first fruit of this remarkable renewal of creation that is taking place, then what does that have to do with our church's emphasis upon peacemaking? What does that have to do with our response to the human-caused degradation of God's beloved creation? What does the resurrection of Jesus and the renewal of creation have to do with the steeple of our church, its absence or its renewal? I'm not saying there are hard fast answers to such questions but I am saying that the very REAL reality of the resurrection is at the very heart of who we are and needs to be the very inspiration for all we do. The truth of the matter is that the resurrected presence of Jesus is the reason for our existence as a church here in Charlotte, Vermont. Without the resurrection's reality, we would not be. We stand as a witness to it right up here on Church Hill as does our steeple. But first it's the resurrection. If at any point it becomes first about the steeple, then we've got a problem. Or if at any point it becomes first about Peace, even, or being a Just Peace church, then we've got a problem. If it's first about me as minister of this church, then we've got a problem cause ministers come and go, the resurrection is always and only why we are here. If it's first about you the congregation or majority rule or committees and not the resurrection then we've got a problem. If it's even first about helping the poor and seeking justice and not first about the resurrection then we've got a problem. If its first about being open and accommodating to other religions and not first about the resurrection then we've got a problem. We start with the resurrection and then we've got to figure our way to the openness to other religions – a task that mostly has not been done well by the more liberal Christian church. I think you get what I mean. At the very first, at the heart, where everything begins for us is the resurrection. IF it begins somewhere else then I'm afraid we are something other than a Christian congregation...

Let us feel in this Easter season the deep pulling and drawing of ourselves out into the vast oceanic reality of God and let us frame everything else we do within that context... in Jesus' name, amen.