

A Garden in the Wilderness
EASTER
April 4, 2010
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For the last six weeks we have been talking about the wilderness.

Lent is a time for reflection, a time for digging deeper into our lives and seeing what God is wanting to do with us.

It is a chance to look at ourselves:

- Our values
- Our promises
- Our priorities
- Our shortcomings

And decide if we want those things of the past to define our future?

To decide if we want to remain lost and wandering in the wilderness or to live in the resurrected joy of Jesus love!

There is a great story about Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, anybody remember the name?

Nilolai was a Russian Communist leader who took part in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917. Later he became the editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda (which by the way means truth), and was a full member of the Politburo. His works on economics and political science are still read today.

In 1930 he took a journey from Moscow to Kiev to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism.

Speaking to the crowd he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity → hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

An hour later he was finished.

He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of men's faith.

"Are there any questions?" He howled

Deafening silence filled the auditorium

Eventually one man approached the platform and mounted the lectern standing near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd arose as one man and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!"

I say to you this morning: CHRIST IS RISEN! (HE IS RISEN INDEED!).

I am convinced!

I have faith that Jesus was dead and Jesus was buried.

That I believe.

But, this too I accept as true: Jesus is ALIVE!

But, you will say to me, how do you know that the resurrection is real?

How do you know that it is really valid?

Three reasons:

1. Somebody told me
2. Because it has stood the test of time
3. Because I have experienced it

First I would say that I believe in resurrection because somebody told me about it.

My first experience of Easter is from right here in church → I learned about it as a little boy!

Some of you would immediately reply, that certainly isn't very reliable.

Well, it may not be ---- but the truth of the matter is that most of what we know is simply because somebody told us about it.

How do you know that Columbus discovered America in 1492.

Were you there?

No, you were not there, but there were people there who witnessed and wrote about it and that is how we know about that.

How do you personally know that a man has walked on the moon?

Were you standing there to meet Neil Armstrong when he made that "Giant Leap for Mankind"?

Well, you say, I know it because I saw it on TV.
in Hollywood.

Many of them would insist that the International Space Station is all a hoax.

That may sound absurd, but the truth of the matter is I cannot prove it or disprove it either way and neither can you.

In the end, I guess I would have to say: I do believe that a man has walked on the moon, simply because a lot of people have told me about it.

When Mary went to the tomb on that first Easter morning she did so with a

heavy heart. Her Master, her teacher, her friend had been executed and died. All of life was now in doubt.

She stood at the entrance to that tomb weeping.

And then she meets the gardener and then the gardener calls her by name.

"Mary," he says.

Can you imagine the look in her eyes and she turns and looks into his.

Do you remember what she said?

The joy of that first Easter can be found in her one word response, "Rabboni!"

She yells. "Teacher!" And from what John tells us she must have leaped into his arms.

Now I want you to listen to this next thing Jesus tells Mary. It is the job description for the church. Jesus tells her: Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them.

My friends I believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ because someone told me about it.

Second reason that I believe in the resurrection is that it has stood the test of time.

A lot of things start off good but soon fizzle out.

I'll never forget the Chicago Bulls, my favorite pro Basketball team.

The things that Michael Jordan accomplished on the floor of the United Center were simply impossible to describe.

During the nineties he eclipsed all other athletes.

Then came Tiger Woods in 2000.

What Woods did in winning four Major titles in a row in 2000-2001 is arguably the greatest athletic accomplishment of our time.

But, let me tell you something. These athletes and singers and actors are catapulted to the national spotlight but their star soon fades, either because our memories of them fade over time or they tarnish their reputations because of their own personal failings.

Fame fades and new fads and fashions emerge.

The music industry's philosophy is, "You are only as good as your last hit record."

Songs come and go so fast you barely have time to learn them but take that song Amazing Grace.

Now there is a song that has stood the test of time.

John Newton, that infamous British slave trader, after his conversion and subsequently renounced his slave trading wrote this great hymn:

Amazing Grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind but now I see.

Your great grandparents sang that song, and long after you and I are gone, people will still be singing that song. Why? It's the real thing and it has stood the test of time.

I believe the resurrection is genuine because it has stood the test of time.

It was not something that was here today and gone tomorrow.

As long as there is life on earth there will be people talking about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The third reason I believe in the resurrection is because I have experienced it.

The first century disciples did not believe in the resurrection because they could explain it; they believed in the resurrection because they had experienced it.

In some villages in Mexico there is a rather unique baptism custom, that is rather ancient.

They believe in the practice of baptism by immersion, but rather than using a typical baptismal pool they use one in the shape of a casket.

The oldest known baptismal font in existence is from a 3rd century Syrian house church and it is in the shape of a casket.

Why a casket --- so that through baptism a person can experience the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Yet, as beautiful a sentiment and symbol as that is, there must be more to resurrection than that.

The best proof of the resurrection is not in what the witnesses said that they saw, but in how they responded to what they saw.

A frightened band of disciples huddled together in a house with the door barred.

That is the scene before resurrection.

A powerful band of mighty witnesses thrust out into the world.

That is the scene post-resurrection.

It has been estimated that by the end of the first century over a half million people had come under the Christian banner.

That is the power of resurrection.

It is never easy to disregard the testimony of witnesses who are ready to die for their cause.

Eventually, of course, every one of the disciples met a violent death.

People may lie to perpetuate a myth, I will grant you that.

But people are not going to die to perpetuate what they know to be a myth.

Maybe one. Maybe even two or three. But not all twelve.

They were not men who had a death wish.

They knew what they had seen.

They believed in it so passionately that they were willing to put their lives on the line in their efforts to tell the story to others.

They were resurrection people.

The Apostle Paul also talked about experiencing the resurrected Jesus.

The resurrection is not simply a historical event.

It is quite different from, say the Battle of Waterloo or man's landing on the moon.

The resurrection is an ongoing event, an event shared by every generation.

It is an event we are invited to participate in.

We are to become resurrection people.

Then we will echo the words of Paul to the Philippians:

“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection” (Phil 3:10)

Maybe you have heard the saying:

The only difference between a grave and a rut is the dimensions.

It is a folksy way of saying the resurrection is not just for the afterlife; it is also for this life here and now.

Don't get in a rut and miss the impact of the resurrection.

It is power for the living of these days.

My friends, we can sing the great hymns of Easter, we can hear again the

familiar stories of scripture, we can enjoy the lilies. Easter can be experienced in these ways.

But the real power of Easter is the way that people's lives are moved from death to life,

- from sealed tomb to open doorway,
- from despair to hope,
- from the old ways to new opportunities.

That is Easter.

That is resurrection.

I believe in the resurrection because I have seen the God of resurrection at work.

I have seen the risen Christ raise people from the death of despair to the joy of new life.

Let me tell you a true story that happened some time ago: A young boy's father died in a car wreck when he was twelve years old. He read it in the newspaper before anyone got word to him to tell him about it. When he saw that picture of the family car smashed-up on the front page of the newspaper... and read that his dad had died in that accident, he was thrust immediately and painfully into the shocked numbness of deep grief.

Strangely, one of his very first feelings were those of guilt. He had remembered how some months before at a family picnic he was showing off with a baseball. At one point he got careless and threw wildly; it hit his dad in the hand and broke his thumb. The young boy felt horrible. He said to himself, "What a terrible son I am! I have caused my dad great pain."

It seemed that was all he could remember after his father's death — the pain he caused his dad. Finally, the young boy went to see his pastor and told him about the deep feelings of guilt and about breaking his dad's thumb.

The young boy ... well, let me tell you in the boy's own words, he said:

I'll never forget how my pastor handled that. He was so great. He came around the desk with tears in his eyes. He sat down across from me and said:

"Now, Jim," that was the boy's name, "you listen to me. If your dad could come back to life for five minutes and be right here with us... and if he knew you were worried about that, what would he say to you?"

"He would tell me to quit worrying about that," Jim said.

"Well, all right," the minister said, "then you quit worrying about that

right now. Do you understand me?"

"Yes sir," he said... and he did.

That minister was saying: "You are forgiven. Accept the forgiveness ... and make a new start with your life."

The young boy did make a new start. And today, many years later, he is the pastor of one of the largest United Methodist churches in the country.

That's Easter.

The Risen Lord comes back to life... and assures the disciples that they are forgiven.

- Peter had denied his Lord three times.
- Thomas had doubted.
- All the disciples had forsaken Him.

But, Christ came back, forgave them, and resurrected them.

He came back to share with them ... He comes today, this morning, to share with you the joy, the encouragement and the forgiveness of Easter. To help you leave the wilderness behind and come and enjoy the sunshine of his love.

Why do I believe in resurrection?

- I believe in it because somebody told me about it.
- I believe in it because it has stood the test of time.
- But supremely I believe in it because I have seen it in the life of others and I have experienced it myself.

That is why I can stand here this morning and shout: CHRIST IS RISEN!
(HE IS RISEN INDEED!)