

A Sunday School teacher asked her class on the Sunday before Easter if they knew what happened on Easter and why it was so important. One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey and sing about the pilgrims and all that."

"No, that's not it," said the teacher.

"I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree and decorate it and give gifts to everybody and sing lots of songs."

"Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher.

Finally a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, and put in a tomb and left for three days." "Ah, thank goodness somebody knows" the teacher thought to herself.

But then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside and we have six more weeks of winter."

We know that Easter is a big deal...all the flowers and special effects but we might be hard pressed to say why it's a big deal for me personally. Christmas and Easter are the two big days for Christians but they are different. Its easy to describe our feeling about Christmas; it's all warm and cozy, a sleeping baby and family gatherings. Easter comes after unimaginable suffering and it can be a little hard to describe. After his crucifixion, the disciples of Jesus were trying to sort out the meaning of the reports they had been receiving about appearances of the risen Christ. It was most confusing to them. Was it a hoax? They were not completely immune to superstition.

Perhaps it was some kind of ghost. Suddenly it happened. Jesus himself stood among them. The disciples were startled and frightened. Then Jesus said to them, "Why are you troubled and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself..." The response of the disciples is a sermon in itself. Luke tells us that they "disbelieved for joy..." It was simply too wonderful to be true. He was alive and he was with them right there. No wonder they had difficulty believing. Some persons still have that problem today. Many desperately want to believe but something holds them back.

In the first place, some of us have difficulty believing that God really cares about us that much. Some of us are more comfortable with an impersonal God who is the First Cause, the Ground of Being, a Source of life and power but not of personality. "The force be with you" is not nearly as scary as saying "the lord be with you." The idea of God with nail prints in his hands and feet because of his great love for us is an idea we are not ready for. In trying to deal with the meaning of the cross on which Christ died, the early church came to understand that those nailprints in the hands and feet of the Master should have been ours. But God so loved the world that he sent his own Son to bear the burden for us all. Can you deal with that? Can you believe that God really cares about us that much?

Then there are others of us who have difficulty believing that life really goes on beyond the tomb. It simply is too wonderful to believe that there is a world beyond this one another existence in which that which dies here is resurrected to new life there. Yet such a conviction is at the heart of our faith.

Its not boring clouds and harps, it's not a happy coma where nothing happens. The resurrected Jesus is a busy person, meeting people, patching up old relationships, explaining what had happened. It's Jesus with all his interests and relationships, with all his memories and even his scars – its whatever was unique about him. But he is very different too: not bound by the limits of space and time, not worried about the past, not waiting for a future but just living in the presence of God and inviting his followers to do the same.

So some persons cannot believe God really loves us that much. Some cannot believe that life really does go on beyond the grave. Even more significantly, most people do not want to deal with the implications of those two truths. What does it mean if there really is a God who is that intimately concerned about our lives? What does it mean if this life really is but a prelude to everlasting life?

We see the difference it made in the disciples. From frightened and uncertain men marked by doubt and envy, they became apostles of great courage and self-giving. How about you? What difference has been made in your life by seeing the hands and feet of the risen Christ? Has it had some effect on the goals you have set for your life? After all, if life is indeed eternal, some of our goals are going to seem awfully shortsighted and self-serving, are they not?

When an Amazon explorer returned home the people were eager to learn all about the vast and mighty river and the country surrounding it. How he wondered, could he ever describe it to them - how could he ever put into words the feelings that flooded into his heart when he saw the

exotic flowers and heard the night sounds of the jungle. How could he communicate to them the smells that filled the air and the sense of danger and excitement that would come whenever he and his fellow explorers encountered strange animals or paddled through treacherous rapids?

So the explorer did what all good explorers do - he said to the people, "go and find out for yourselves what it is like", and to help them he drew a map of the river pointing out the various features of its course and describing some of the dangers and some of the routes that could be used to avoid those dangers.

The people took the map and they framed and hung it on the wall of the local science museum so that everyone could look at it. Some made copies of it. After a period of time many of those who made copies for themselves considered themselves experts on the river - and indeed they knew its every turn and bend, they knew how broad it was and how deep, where the rapids were and where the falls. They knew the river and they instructed others in what it was like whenever those people indicated an interest in it.

I think that many people today are in the same situation. We must not just learn the stories of the resurrection. We must experience what it means to repent of our sins and allow God to forgive us. Otherwise we are like Lucy in a peanuts cartoon. Lucy is saying her prayers. When she is finished, she walks into the kitchen where Linus is eating and comments: "I was praying for greater patience and understanding, but I quit ...". In the last frame, she continues: "I was afraid I might get it."

Are we afraid that the truth of the resurrection is going to require something more of us than lilies and chocolate.

James McReynolds was onto something when he wrote:

Whatever else the resurrection of Jesus means, it means that God is getting close to us.

We fear that.

Easter, we say, is a day of joy and it really is.

We say it is a day of hope and it really is.

We say it is a day of promise and it really is.

But we are not as fond of it as we think.

We are afraid of it.

We are more afraid of it than we will ever say.

Frankly the good news here makes us shake in our shoes.

So little wonder that Jesus says to these shaking, quaking disciples: "Peace be with you." Or to put it colloquially, "It's going to be fine. I know you don't understand how all this has come to pass, but it's going to be all right. In fact, very all right."

Easter overwhelms us and that is one reason the church spread the easter season out over 7 weeks; to help us be at peace with this awesome, life changing good news.