

In the early church and still today in the Orthodox church, Christians would greet each other like this. The first speaker would say, “**Christ is Risen.**” Then the other person would respond, “**He is risen indeed!**” Let’s give that a try: **Christ is Risen – He is Risen indeed.** This is not, however, about a lesson in history or culture; it is about recognizing the most important statement that we will ever make. Why? Because if we really believe it – not just repeat it -- then it changes things.

Father Basil Pennington, a monk, was once on a retreat and tells of an encounter he had with a teacher of Zen. He asked to meet privately with this Zen master. Pennington says that at his meeting the teacher sat there before him smiling from ear to ear and rocking gleefully back and forth. Finally the teacher said: “I like Christianity. But I would not like Christianity without the resurrection. I want to see your resurrection!”

Pennington notes that, “*With his directness, the teacher was saying what everyone else implicitly says to Christians: **You are a Christian. You are risen with Christ. Show me (what this means for you in your life) and I will believe.***” That is how people know if the resurrection is true or not. Does it affect how we live?

Christ is risen – he is risen indeed

When faced with something new, something outside your experience, you have at least three options for how to respond (and it is nearly certain that you will opt for one of these three possibilities). **First**, you can stay bewildered.

You can let this event knock you flat on your back and then stay there. **Second**, you can engage in world-class denial. You can look at the facts and ignore them. **Or third**, you can, slowly perhaps, assimilate this new information. You embrace this new truth and then go through the long, sometimes painful, process of re-assessing life in the light of this new situation.

This is the Easter choice. When faced with the incredible proclamation that Jesus rose again from the dead, **you can be agnostic and cynical** by saying that you don't know what to make of this and you are not really going to try. Who cares anyway? **Or you can deny it.** The whole thing is fiction, fantasy, a pious wish but something that never really happened. **Or you can move past the shock toward acceptance.** But let me caution you: if you are going to accept the truth of the resurrection, you need to let it change you totally.

That's the Easter choice. The problem for most of us is that we are not surprised enough by Easter to realize we face a choice to make. Easter has become part of the background scenery of our lives. We've never been afraid of Easter, never been bewildered by it. Believing that Jesus rose again from the dead becomes a little like believing the earth is round and that it orbits the sun. Once upon a time people didn't know that. It caused quite a stir when this view had to be revised. But that was a long time ago and now we accept that picture of our solar system without much thought. Sure the world is round and we orbit the sun, but what does that have to do with anything? It doesn't change what I have to do at work tomorrow, does it?

Is that what Easter becomes for us? We believe it happened but then, we've always believed that. Even Easter has somehow become part of the "routines" of this world. We have tamed Easter with images of bunnies and colored eggs and baskets of chocolate. Easter is no longer shocking for us -- it surely does not make us re-evaluate everything else we think we know. And anyway, we're not sure we want to have everything in our lives changed. **We gather here today** to again be shocked by the experience of the resurrection.

The Easter story begins with fear. It's not wild panic but with the kind of fear that feels a lot like heart-break. It begins with that twist in your stomach that comes when the phone rings and you hear the voice of your sister. "Are you sitting down?" she asks--that kind of fear.

Early in the morning, three women approach the tomb bearing precious herbs and oils to wash the body of their Lord. They have come to comb out Jesus' hair, to sponge away the dried blood, to massage precious myrrh into his skin. They hope to perform the ritual act of care that is traditionally done before sealing a body in the tomb. Yet, even as they discuss how they will gain access to the cave they find that the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty--vacant, except for some young guy who is definitely not Jesus; and suddenly, they are afraid.

They fear that their last chance to pour a little compassion on the broken body of Jesus has escaped. **They fear** that they are witnessing the final insult of this whole horrible affair. First, Jesus' life is stolen, and now, even his body has been taken. And, perhaps, **they simply must fear** that death has won.

Death does seem to win – a lot. Somewhere this week, an old couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry, but he wouldn't be able to come for a visit over the holidays after all. "The grandkids say hello." They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone they didn't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company and they had to let her go. "So sorry." She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her kids.

Earlier this week, someone received terrible news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, "*I don't love you anymore.*" Earlier this week, someone's hope was crucified. And the darkness was overwhelming.

I suspect that no one is ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It's about more hope than we can handle.

Christ is risen – he is risen indeed

When the risen Lord appears to Mary, at first glance, she does not recognize him but then she quickly comes to realize that her beloved friend lives and she runs to the rest of the disciples to proclaim the good news. Mary's first step after seeing the empty tomb was to share the news of her sad discovery with her fellow believers.

She now shares her joy by returning to Jerusalem and announcing that she had seen and spoken with Jesus. The gospel reminds us that this connection between believing and then sharing the joy and hope that come from our belief should be a natural progression in our lives. Sharing the incredible, shocking news that life triumphs over death is the fundamental and essential element of Christian belief!

A young fellow came to visit his pastor. Eventually the conversation came around to the subject of Easter. After all, if you take Christianity seriously, it will ultimately always lead you to Easter. **“What do you think of the resurrection,** he asked. The pastor replied: *I believe that it happened in reality and not just in the minds of men.* **What is your evidence,** he asked, like a professor prodding a student. The pastor presented as Exhibit A: the disciples. Men are not going to give up their lives to simply perpetuate something they know to be a hoax.

“I don’t know,” he mumbled. **“I just don’t know.”** There was his problem. He was seeking knowledge, not faith. You do not say: *resurrected Christ, appear to me and then I will believe.* It is just the opposite. The resurrected Christ appeared only to those who did believe. The angel told the men: *Go to Judea and there you will find him.* Judea represents the community of believers. Judea was to be the place where Jesus would plainly reveal to his followers that he was indeed alive. He did not reveal himself to the Caiaphas and Pilates and Herods of the world; but his risen form could clearly be seen in the midst of the community – the community that was called to be the body of Christ.

The world needs to be shocked again by the experience of the resurrection and they will find that experience in this community when it joyfully continues the lord's ministry as the Body of Christ today.

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