

## The Park Road Pulpit

### *Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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#### ***Can You Live With The Resurrection?***

*John 21.1-19*

Russ Dean, July 25, 2010



#### Can you live with the resurrection?

This sermon was first preached on the Sunday after Easter – that day on which the Church of Jesus Christ comes out in its springtime best to celebrate. Parking lots overflow. Organs chime, brass ensembles fanfare, choirs hosanna, banners fly, all to proclaim: Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! But the question for the Sunday after Easter – and every Sunday – is not if you believe in the resurrection. The question is if you can you live with it?<sup>1</sup>

In John’s text we learn that shortly after this event that has changed the course of human history, the friends who were closest to Jesus returned to a life of fishing “[Their return] (says Fred Craddock) implies that the disciples were unable to sustain Easter (to live with the resurrection) beyond resurrection appearances. Belief in the resurrection was an item of faith, but it had not been translated into life and mission in the world.” Craddock, the great Methodist preacher and teacher of preachers, goes on to suggest, “The radical decline in church attendance . . . after Easter Sunday indicates that the [disciples’] problem is still with us.” Dr. Craddock says without mincing words what many preachers are thinking as they stand in their pulpits the Sunday after Easter (and throughout the month of July!): Hello? Is anybody there? Where is the Church today?

Can you live with the resurrection? Along with the disciples, the Church has proven that we can celebrate it, talk about it, sing of it, get dressed up and worship the miracle of it. We can

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<sup>1</sup> In this sermon I am continuing an ongoing argument which distinguishes a life of faith from a life of intellectual ascent to various doctrines of belief. The religion of my childhood placed ultimate importance in *believing* – if you *believe* the right things, then you can be saved. This seems a rather sterile argument to me now. Faith must be experiential, practical, active. The resurrection, then, like all important items of our faith, is not of ultimate importance simply as something to “believe in,” but as something to be experienced, changed by, even as the first disciples were.

believe it. But, I'm not sure we have yet learned to live with it. In fact, looking at our world that has clearly not been transformed is all the evidence that we need to the contrary.

Can you live with the resurrection?

To answer that question perhaps we need to more clearly define what it means to affirm the resurrection of Jesus Christ? Is it simply to believe that Jesus of Nazareth, who was clinically “dead,” took up breathing again? Is resurrection to be defined purely biologically? Or is there more to it than that? Let me offer you a distinction this morning between “Resurrection” and “resuscitation.” The distinction spells the difference in a risen messiah and a Living Lord.<sup>2</sup> Do you understand the difference? Have you come today to worship one whose biological life was miraculously restored, or to Live the Resurrection with the One who restores Life?

Peter's brother, Andrew, introduced him to Jesus. “*Come and see, we have found the Messiah*” (John 1). Jesus knew there was something special about “Simon,” because he immediately changed his name. “*You will be called ‘Peter’*” (John 1). The Gospel of Matthew adds, “...and upon this rock (*Peter*) I will build my church...” (Matthew 16). On the witness and strength of Simon Peter's faith, the Christian Church will stand or fall.

From the beginning his strength was evident. When others fell away because Jesus' teaching was difficult, Peter affirmed that he would not leave his Lord. “*To whom should we go? For you have the words of eternal life!*” (John 6). In Mark's gospel it was Peter who first affirmed Jesus' character, his unique relationship with God. Peter's confession at Caesarea Philippi is the turning point in Mark's story. “*Some say you are John the Baptist, others Elijah, or one of the prophets,*” the disciples answered him. But Peter offered confidently: “*You are the Christ.*” (Mark 8).

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<sup>2</sup> I use a lower case “messiah” here to indicate an early messiah – who was the expectation of Israel (to restore political and military greatness).

Peter was a leader, confident and strong. But Peter was also impetuous, compulsive, high-strung, quick tempered, and quick to speak. When Jesus began washing the feet of his friends, Peter balked. “Never” would he allow Jesus to perform such a menial task. But when Jesus spoke softly, “*Unless I wash your feet, Peter, you have no part with me,*” Peter immediately responded, “*[then] not just my feet, Lord, but my hands and my head as well!*” (John 13).

On the mountain that day, when Jesus was changed before their eyes, and the disciples saw Moses and Elijah with him, Peter envisioned glory, political and military gain, national power – “*Let’s build three shelters here,*” he suggested, three monuments to Israel’s soon-to-be reclaimed prestige and position, and to its new “messiah.” When Jesus talked of his own suffering and death, Peter rebuked him, and Jesus’ response to his misunderstanding friend still stings, as it cuts quick into our well-intentioned, but naive and ignorant hearts, “*Get behind me, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me, for you do not have in mind the things of God*” (Matthew 16).

Peter thought he had in mind the “things of God.” God’s way ought to be the way of power and prestige and dominance and exaltation, shouldn’t it? How quickly and easily we are convinced of this, sometimes by the power of popular persuasion, sometimes by the proud sound of our own voice. Who needs a Messiah who excels in humility, submission, meekness, self-sacrifice?

Peter did not.

So, Peter, who had followed so closely, supported so faithfully, watched so intently, listened so carefully, and loved Jesus so honestly, backed himself into a corner of his own making. It was a corner steeped high in the expectations of exaltation and earthly power – and when Jesus’ expectations failed Peter, Peter’s discipleship failed Jesus.

*“No, I’m not one of his disciples.”*

*“I was not with him in the garden.”*

*“I don’t even know the man” (Mark 14).*

The sun peered into the City of Zion, somewhere a rooster crowed,<sup>3</sup> and at that moment, Peter saw himself in the face of Judas.

On that first Easter Sunday morning Christ's most devoted followers came to the tomb. We are told they found the tomb empty and reported this news to the disciples, but not one of them knew what it meant. The tomb is empty! The body is gone! Why has this happened? What does this mean? "*Someone has taken my Lord!*" cried Mary (John 20).

You see, the empty tomb is not enough. "The empty tomb does not lead to faith. Writing in the Formations curriculum for Smyth and Helwys, Phill Nall says, "not one person in the biblical witness came to faith over finding the tomb empty."<sup>4</sup> Even Jesus' closest friends did not know what to make of it. For critics and witnesses, then and now, the empty tomb signifies one of two things: treachery at worst (someone had stolen the body), or some form of resuscitation at best (a human man had walked out of there). But an empty tomb does not prove Resurrection!

Walter Kasper says "The decision for or against [resurrection faith] is not taken on the grounds of some miraculous event... but on whether one is ready to see reality from God's viewpoint and to rely totally upon God in living and in dying."<sup>5</sup>

Resuscitated bodies die, again – you could ask old Lazarus about that – but the Church has affirmed for 20 centuries not that Christ was risen, but that Christ is risen! Christian Faith did not spring from a belief that Jesus "lived again" – as the result of some one-of-a-kind "life after death" experience. Christian faith was born in the disciples' experience of resurrection – in meeting Jesus again, for the first time, and finally knowing him as Lord.<sup>6</sup>

Only as disciples continue to experience his resurrection will the Christian Church live.

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<sup>3</sup> I have borrowed this phrase from my friend, Kyle Matthew, from an unpublished song of his entitled, "Somewhere A Rooster Crows."

<sup>4</sup> Smyth and Helwys, "Formations," April 12, 1998.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, Kasper's exact quote is "...for or against *Easter faith*..."

<sup>6</sup> A recent book by Marcus Borg is entitled *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*.

Mary reported her encounter with Jesus to the disciples. She had mistaken him for the gardener, but then she heard his voice. He called her name. He looked into her eyes. He offered again the hope and peace and promised of Life. Easter had come – for Mary! And so the disciples gathered and sang and prayed and worshiped Mary’s belief.<sup>7</sup> Jesus was back (so Mary said). But Peter... You remember “*upon this Rock*” Peter? Peter decided he would... go fishing. “Yeah. I think I’ll um... I think I’ll, well.... I’m going back to Galilee. Think I’ll get the boat and the nets. Left it all at my folks’ place. Kind of miss that ole boat. You know, I made a good living fishing. It’s respectable work. Time to spend with my family... You know what they say, ‘A bad day on the lake is better than a good day in the office...’”

So Easter Sunday came and went, even for the first disciples, and Monday found them... fishing. Again.

That first night of fishing wasn’t so good, but Peter was too consumed with his conscience to be concerned about his catch. So as daylight approached, they rowed silently toward shore until that stranger called to them and their nets suddenly strained under the weight of Crappie and Cod and Palestinian Perch. Peter strained at the nets, but when he caught another glimpse of the stranger’s eyes... he knew him! And impulsive Peter threw on his clothes and jumped into the sea.

Peter did not understand his faith when he first met Jesus. Peter did not understand his faith when he acknowledged Jesus as “The Christ.” Peter did not understand his faith when he saw Christ with Moses and Elijah, wrapped in glory. Peter did not understand his faith when he learned the lesson of foot-washing discipleship. Peter did not understand his faith when he betrayed his most beloved friend.

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<sup>7</sup> Perhaps this is the crux of my argument – “belief in” resurrection is for many, simply someone else’s belief. We must each experience the risen Christ in order to truly “believe” in resurrection.

But when Peter finally experienced the Resurrected Christ. Then, he was able to break bread with the one who offers Life beyond fishing. And he heard those words, “*Simon Peter, do you love me?*” and he understood: three-fold forgiveness.

It was grace enough to cover his three-fold denial.

At that moment Peter began to understand his faith. For at that moment he began to understand that resurrection is not about Jesus breathing again, walking again, talking again, eating again. Resurrection is not about Jesus living “then,” it is about Jesus living “now” – with us – for us. Resurrection was not a second life for Jesus, but a new life, a real life, a full and abundant life for Peter for the first time in all of his living days.

Resurrection was a miracle -- it was a miracle that happened to Peter. At that moment Peter began to Live with The Resurrection.

For us... may it be so, even today.

Amen!