

Sermon by the Rev. Bollin M. Millner, Jr.
Grace and Holy Trinity Church
Richmond, Virginia
Easter Sunday – April 21, 2019

What a joy it is to celebrate Easter together...the Passover of the Lord. We have made it through the night, that holy night, when wickedness was put to flight and sin is washed away...that night when Jesus passed over from death to life, breaking the bonds of hell and rising to life immortal¹. We have come to the Sunday of the Resurrection, the festival, indeed the event without which, Christian faith would not exist.

Now of course, I know that Resurrection faith has its share of doubters and of honest questioners. This is only natural. And since the Enlightenment, in the modern, post-modern, and post-post modern eras, we hear these questions and these statements of disbelief.

“Things like this just don’t happen.” “No person alive today could possibly believe these ancient tales.” “The whole idea is just wishful thinking.”

I am not going to produce a bunch of arguments which prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the resurrection of Jesus happened. It is, first and foremost, a matter of trust. It is a matter of having faith in something that cannot be seen, holding that faith with fierceness so powerful that you order your life around it.

That said, let me suggest, that perhaps the skeptics show a lack of imagination. Let me share two things with you that may expand our minds.

The first has been in the headlines in recent days. You saw the first ever picture of a black hole...it was front page news. It is 55 million light years from us. You remember a light year is a measure of distance...light can travel just under six trillion miles in a year...and this thing is 55 million of those from us. So that is the first “wow”! The universe is huge.

¹ Paraphrased from The Easter Vigil, Book of Common Prayer, page 287.

And then there is the black hole itself. A black hole is a place “where the pulling force of gravity is so strong that light is not able to escape. The strong gravity occurs because matter has been pressed into a tiny space.”² The black hole in question has 6.5 billion times the mass of our sun and is so large our entire solar system would fit into it. And of course, time itself is warped by a black hole to an extreme degree. Indeed, from our perspective, time relative to an object falling into a black hole, would stop.

All of which is to say, we live in a very weird, strange, and marvelous universe. Who can believe it?

Let me give you another example of how weird things can be. This one is earth bound.

Katherine and I just finished over 40 hours of instruction so we could be certified as Virginia Master Naturalists. “ The Virginia Master Naturalist program is a statewide corps of volunteers providing education, outreach, and service to benefit natural areas and natural resources...”³ We studied plants, birds, fish, amphibians, you name it. And one of the most interesting topics was geology.

You know that Eurasia, North and South America, India, Australia, Africa, and Antarctica used to be all one huge supercontinent, called Pangaea. It broke apart over time, and I think we all knew that. The eastern edge of South America fits with the western edge of Africa, that is an obvious one.

What I didn’t know is that what is now North America was down at the equator and upside down from what it now is. So as the tectonic plates moved, things not only separated but turned and twisted into the formation we now have. This supercontinent began to break apart 175 million years ago.⁴

² <https://www.nasa.gov/audience/forstudents/5-8/features/nasa-knows/what-is-a-black-hole-58.html>

³ <https://ext.vt.edu/natural-resources/master-naturalists.html>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pangaea>

What a perspective! The land we are on has made quite a journey, and as the earthquake I experience soon after I moved to Richmond 16 years ago, things are still on the move. Don't we live on a very weird, strange, and marvelous planet. It boggles the mind and fires the imagination.

Now I know there is science behind all of these amazing things, and the world of faith, the claims of faith, are not open to scientific inquiry in the way that the natural world is. But there are other ways of knowing. There is other truth, than that which science is able to uncover. And I am just saying that things which seem so impossible, might not be.

As I've said, I cannot give proof positive of the resurrection. I cannot transport you back in history, even if that would solve the issue. It really is a matter of faith.. not just that something did happen, but that something still is happening.

As one commentator said recently, "The central question of Easter is not 'What happened to Jesus way back then?' but rather, 'Where is Jesus now – for us?'"...

The resurrection, although breaking into history on a specific temporal occasion, is not the property of the past. As God's future showing itself in our present, it belongs to all times and season. (We believe that) Jesus is alive, still showing up as a transfiguring presence in a world fraught with absences.

(This means) Jesus is not over, and his story is not over. It will only be completed (when the entire universe is transformed), when God is (all in all)...The resurrection is more than an idea we talk about or believe propositionally. It's something we become, something we 'prove' in the living of our stories."⁵

So how do we live or become the resurrection? How do we prove it with our stories?

⁵ April 10, 2019 Christian Century, page 10, "Don't Explain It" by Jim Friedrich.

We prove the resurrection whenever two or three gather together in Jesus' name to worship God almighty. In a world filled with idols, in our worship, we acknowledge the Creator, who alone is worthy of our ultimate devotion.

We prove the resurrection when we stop blaming others, when we stop projecting our mess, our inmost fears and hatreds onto others, and start being honest and faithful... truly confessing not only our sins, but our faith in Jesus as Lord.

We prove the resurrection when we work to lift up those who have been put down, because of nationality, race, gender, belief, orientation or for any other reason.

We prove the resurrection when the hungry are fed with good things, and the world is moved just a bit more toward becoming a place where all have what they need.

We prove the resurrection when we honor and keep the vows and promises we have made to the people in our lives, so that the fabric of family and human community may have integrity.

We prove the resurrection when we face our own deaths and those of the people we love, with courage and faith, standing fast in the hope that though death may have its day, death is not the end. Through Christ death itself is transformed into the gateway to eternal life in the age to come.

These are some of the ways we become "resurrection" and prove it with our stories. It is up to you to write your story, to prove the resurrection with your life. And you are doing this in and for a world that is desperate for hope, and for meaning.

I want to end this sermon with an affirmation of faith, a compliment to the renewal of our baptismal covenant, which happens in just a moment. This affirmation is one that Sarah Price used throughout Lent with our services of Daily Morning Prayer in the Chapel of the Resurrection.

It comes from the Northumbria community. This community “ is a dispersed network of people... from different backgrounds, streams and edges of the Christian faith.”⁶

In this affirmation of faith, really a series of affirmations...there is a refrain at the end of each section, which goes, “Today I believe.” So, I am going to offer these affirmations, and I ask that at the end of each section, you say with me, “Today I believe.”

Lord, You have always given bread for the coming day;
and though I am poor,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always given strength for the coming day; and though I am weak,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always given peace for the coming day;
and though of anxious heart,
today I believe

Lord, You have always kept me safe in trials;
and now, tried as I am,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always marked the road for the coming day; and though it may be hidden,
today I believe.

⁶ <https://www.northumbriacommunity.org/who-we-are/>

Lord, You have always lightened this darkness of mine;
and though the night (may be) here,
today I believe.

Lord, You have always spoken when time was ripe;
and though you (may) be silent now,
today I believe.

Today, we believe. We believe in the resurrection of Jesus and we write that out
with our lives, our stories.

Let us continue our celebration and affirmation by renewing our Baptismal
Covenant in the spirit of Easter. Alleluia. Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.