

The Touch of Assurance

“The empty tomb is the beginning of hope.”
Matthew 28:1-7

Rev. John H. Hice
April 24, 2011, Easter
First United Methodist Church of Royal Oak, Michigan

Center of Belief

It was one of those lazy spring days in May when the air is thick with the smells of flowers and new-mown lawns, and my formal education was almost complete. I'd spent four years in college and was nearing the end of seminary education. Now, about to say, “Goodbye” to professors and friends, I was heading back to Michigan, a church, and a wedding in my immediate future.

I sat across the table from one of my closest friends. Warren had the reputation as being one of the best theologians in our class. We were eating lunch, aware that life was about to undergo big changes for both of us, when Warren pulled out one of those big questions that's only fair if you have the right to prepare for it. “What,” he asked, “is the most important belief in the Christian Faith?” He hadn't given me fair warning.

Perhaps I haven't given you fair warning this morning either; though asking it today should make it a dead give-away. *What is the most important thing that Christians have to believe?*

Perhaps if it wasn't Easter you would answer that it's the Incarnation, the belief that God was in Jesus. Then you would say that Christmas is the most important holiday and you could point to all the things Jesus said and did in his lifetime and say how they were the profound words and actions of God.

Or maybe you'd say that the most important belief in Christianity is the Golden Rule. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” you'd say. If you pointed to this there is no doubt that you would be pointing to the core of Jesus' teaching. Why wouldn't that be the most important belief?

Perhaps you would rather say that the essential belief is the doctrine of the one God we should love with our whole heart, mind, soul, and strength; or perhaps it's the power of prayer; or another one of the hundreds of doctrines we embrace.

I thought of these when my friend sprang his question on me. I *thought* of them, but it was a Saturday, and lunch was the first meal of the day; the fog in my head hadn't

really cleared, yet. So, I was wise enough to respond with any answer at all. Instead, I said, "That's a good question, Warren, what would you say?"

Unfinished Gospel

Again, since today's Easter, I suppose you already anticipate his answer. "The Resurrection," he said, "everything in our faith revolves around belief in the resurrection like planets revolve around the sun."

Resurrection. It's a hard thing to understand. Birth is a lot easier to believe in. Last week I sat at a spaghetti dinner table and watched, a child engaged in true ministry as she allowed herself to be passed and held by a series of adults: both men and women. Her eyes looked wide and bright at the lights around her and her smile evoked smiles on those who held her and those who watched alike.

True ministry.

There is evidence of birth all around us every day. Perhaps that's why we have such an easier time with Christmas and why, when it comes to Easter, we defer to nature and the rebirth of the world around us (which might *not* be so convincing this year!). The idea that someone can lay lifeless in a tomb, and then be raised from death to eternal life seems quite beyond us; which is what it was for a few grieving women on their way to a tomb.

Mary Magdalene knew just where Jesus' body was laid. She had been there for the burial and now took Mary the mother of James and Salome at the crack of dawn on Sunday. It doesn't look like they were expecting any miracles that morning. They expected only a heavy stone at the door to the tomb.

It must have been just as they got there something happened: right before their very eyes. Matthew says the ground shook: really shook with a great earthquake; and an angel of the Lord descended out of heaven came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. Guards shook and froze. Don't you think it had to be with a touch of irony that the angel said to the women: "Don't be afraid?"

How could they be anything but alarmed? This was beyond them, perhaps even more than it is beyond us. Even after he told them he knew they were looking for Jesus who was crucified, and that he was not there but had risen, to go and tell his disciples that he had gone ahead and would be waiting for them in Galilee," how could they not

be astonished and overwhelmed? How could they be anything but overcome with terror and amazement?

What would you do if you were faced with something that far beyond you?

In the Fall of 1962 the human world might have been facing the greatest threat of extinction we've ever had. Cuba had been taken over by Fidel Castro who imposed Communist rule. The Soviets had begun construction of missile sights just 80 miles off U.S. shores. President Kennedy called for their immediate withdrawal and a showdown was on that took us all to the very brink of nuclear war. My father was always as fascinated with current events as he was with history and his interest had already rubbed off on me, though I was only 10 years old. I knew what was going on and I understood the gravity of the moment. We were on the brink. I was scared.

But there was another thing that was also going on those anxious days. It was a project my father had already planned. Every evening during those difficult October days, my dad took me to the recreation room in the basement to work together, constructing a train table with retractable legs that would fold up against the wall. Night after night and over the weekends while the world was in chaos I enjoyed the constancy of working with my dad who would answer my questions with honesty and reassurance; and together we built something for the future. It gave me hope and the assurance that no matter what happened, I was secure in a love more powerful than the prospect of an invading army or a nuclear blast.

Such gifts he gave me by his constant encouragement and support and love throughout my life, I am certain, helped to convince me of the constancy and faithfulness of God.

Cancer.

Heart disease.

Sky-rocketing fuel costs that inflate the price of food, medicine and everything else.

Global warming.

A crisis in marriage.

Guilt that makes you cringe over something terrible you've done.

Death.

I believe that as we, each of us face the truly scary things of life, we need something more than just a way out of a predicament. We need hope – true hope that says no matter what happens, we are held by something greater than us.

It's hope that keeps us going. And it's hope that says even death is not a defeat. On Christmas Day, 1991, my dad and I went down the basement, lowered the train board we had built 29 years before, and dismantled the tracks so I could take them home and use them with my kids. While we pulled the tiny spikes we listened to the radio as the Soviet flag was lowered over the Kremlin for the last time. By the grace of God, and beyond our wildest dream, the Cold War was over. A new day dawned.

By the grace of God hope comes in the morning. That's what God gave us on Easter. When Jesus came on the scene there wasn't much hope. People were brutalized perhaps worse than they are today. Life was short and most people were poor. It was hard.

What he did was to go to those who hurt the most and give them care. He touched people and healing happened. He freed them up from bondage to hatred and cycles of retaliation by the power of love. Jesus brought the people to life.

He was the living proof of the grace of God. Rather than withdraw any of this grace, he gave himself up and went to the cross. He'd rather die than take back anything he'd given.

That makes the cross the place where the power of death and oppression is stopped. All of it winds up there. It all stops there. And the empty tomb of Easter is the place where hope begins. From the vacated chambers of the place of death, Christ crucified is made the living Christ.

My friend Warren was onto something. Everything in our Faith revolves around Jesus' resurrection. Alive: it's from that stone shoved away that you may be assured – always the greater hand will hold you.

Life with the Living One

The lesson was brought home to me when a friend faced death. It seemed that the more his illness advanced, the more he both loved life and accepted what could come in

a very short time. His attitude was being shaped by God's presence in his life. Always a person of high integrity and faith, generosity and fairness had characterized his life.

Now there was more: he started sharing this faith with friends and family as a matter of gifting those he loved with the most precious thing he had. Increasingly you could tell that he was in the Presence: the love of the living Jesus had so overcome him that he was ever-aware of it and energized by eternal hope.

I visited him in the hospital one day when he spoke about his illness. He told me he believed that it had entered its final stages. "You sound discouraged," I said. "Oh no!" he replied. "God has blessed me with a wonderful life, the love of my children and my wife and such good friends. I'm not discouraged at all. I am blessed."

And I thought to myself, "Wouldn't it be a blessing to live through our whole lives with that kind of assurance?"

Perhaps, when you believe in Easter you can.