***NOT IN VAIN!***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 21, 2019

Texts: 1 Corinthians 15: 12-22 and Luke 24:1-12

When I was growing up in Slippery Rock, PA we had a community sunrise service on Easter each year. We gathered in the community park at sunrise, which was usually about 6:30 a.m. but felt like 4:00 a.m., and we huddled under blankets to sing *Jesus Christ is Risen Today*, accompanied by trumpets. The trumpeters wore gloves and spent most of the service blowing on their mouthpieces so the metal wouldn’t freeze to their lips! We heard a Gospel account of the first Easter morning and a brief sermon whose length was directly related to the frigid temperature before singing another hymn of joy and then racing for the hot chocolate or hot coffee or hot anything to regain some feeling in our fingers. It was supposed to be a joyful way to start the Easter day, but I am not sure I ever fully appreciated the wonder and awe of it all!

This Lent I read a book by Fleming Rutledge entitled, *The Undoing of Death*. It is a collection of sermons she preached in Holy Week in a variety of churches large and small over the years. In one of those sermons she makes this somewhat surprising revelation:

*I know that I stand under judgment for the superficiality of much of my ministry.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

In essence she is confessing that sometimes she is just going through the motions, not fully embracing her call to ministry, not fully appreciating the good news she proclaims. Those Easter sunrise services of my youth were such moments for me; we all have such moments, times when we do what we do without much passion or purpose. It is the superficiality of ministry and sometimes of living. So I wonder: Is this one of those times for you? Are you here today because you are ecstatic about the good news of resurrection or are you just going through the motions? If you are Christian this is where you are expected to be on Easter morning – in church singing alleluias and hearing again about the empty tomb and risen Lord! But does that really mean anything to you anymore? Is resurrection the good news you embrace with great joy worthy of those alleluias? Or are you just going through Easter *motions* without any Easter *emotions*?

The emotions of that first Easter morning were a mixture of grief, perplexity, and awe that only later became joy, according to Luke – grief when they arrive to anoint the dead body of Jesus, confusion when they find the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, terror at the appearance of two angels and then encouragement as the angels remind them of what Jesus said about rising on the third day. “Then they remembered his words,” writes Luke. So, the women return to tell their story to the disciples of Jesus. No alleluias escape their lips that morning. They went, they saw, they heard, they recalled, they returned, they shared. And Luke says the disciples did not believe them; they considered the women’s story to be *an idle tale* which is a kind way of saying what it says in the Greek: something akin to *stark, raving madness*. Perhaps to confirm the idleness of the women’s tale, Peter goes to the tomb alone; he finds no body, no angels, just the linen burial cloths, and then he goes home, amazed at what had happened. That is the end of that part of the story.

What did they believe that first Easter morning? Luke doesn’t tell us. There is a hint of faith in the women’s recollection of Jesus’ words about rising on the third day, in the angels’ words (*He is not here, but has arisen*), and in Peter’s awe as he left the tomb. But there are no alleluias sung, no faith professed, no cries of “He is risen! He is risen indeed!” Only when the women and disciples encounter the risen Lord do the seeds of faith planted at the empty tomb blossom into resurrection joy with a chorus of alleluias shared far and wide – even this far and this wide!

Do you share their awe, wonder, and joy, or do you regard it all as an idle tale? Do you believe what one of our confirmands expressed in her Call to Worship: *It’s true! Our Lord and Savior lives and is risen from the dead!* Or are you still lingering at the tomb, wondering what really happened there and what you should make of it all? Do you believe that Jesus was raised from the dead? Or have you given up looking for the living among the dead on Easter morning?

These were questions that the folks in the Church in Corinth were wrestling with. As Paul frames it: *If Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?* For Paul it was a question that went to the heart of their faith. Either Christ was raised which offered resurrection hope for all of us, or Christ was not raised and their faith and hope in him were in vain. If Christ was not raised then his story ended at the tomb where his crucified body was laid, his words about rising on the third day were false, his resurrection appearances to all those witnesses were a sham – just more idle tales. If Christ was not raised, then Death had the last word in his story. But if Christ was raised as so many witnesses testified, then God is stronger than Death as Jesus said and makes all things possible – even our resurrection – and our hope in him is not in vain.

In essence, Paul suggests, you can’t pick and choose what you want to believe about Jesus. He comes as a package that includes great teachings and miracles, self-giving love and forgiveness of sins, but also crucifixion and resurrection. We may want to remake him into a messiah that is more to our liking by selectively choosing what to believe, like Thomas Jefferson who cut out all the miracle stories in his Bible because they seemed irrational; but Jesus is who he is, says Paul – the loving, crucified messiah and risen Lord. Crucifixion is easy to believe because Rome crucified so many others; resurrection is harder to grasp. Maybe that is because crucifixion is what we do; resurrection is what God does! We are horrified at the physics of crucifixion, but we can’t begin to understand the physics of resurrection or make rational sense of it. There is no description of the resurrection in the Gospels – just an empty tomb and the risen Lord. Can you believe it anyway? Can you believe the women at the tomb and the angels and the disciples and the saints across the ages who echo those words of our confirmands: *It’s true! Our Lord and Savior lives, he is risen from the dead!*?

Death does not have the last word, says Paul. God does! “*As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ*.” Paul makes that claim as one who believes it with all his heart and believes it offers resurrection hope for the world. Deny if you will that resurrection can happen, but do you really think that God is so limited? Something happened at that tomb 2,000 years ago that changed the course of history! Something inspired disciples, martyrs, and saints alike to say, *It’s true! Our Lord and Savior lives, he is risen from the dead!* Resurrection may seem hard to believe, but that is how it should be, for defeating death is extraordinarily hard. It is something only God could do!

In one of her sermons entitled, *It Ain’t Necessarily So*, Fleming Rutledge recalls attending the funeral of a 58 year-old man named Cook Kimball. He was one of the saints of his New York church and had been in poor health for many years. He was awaiting a kidney transplant but died before a kidney became available. His death caught many folks by surprise, but what surprised them even more was the memory of what happened the Sunday before his death. Mr. Kimball was scheduled to be an usher that day, but early that morning he crossed his name off the usher list and substituted his name for that of the man scheduled to read the second Scripture lesson. Thus it was that Cook Kimball read the epistle lesson in church six days before his death. There are 1,189 chapters in the Bible; out of all those chapters, the assigned lesson he read that day was the text you heard this morning from 1 Corinthians:

*Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?....*

It was as if he had a premonition of what was to come and needed to share that word. If coincidence is indeed God’s way of working anonymously, then God’s fingerprints were all over that reading. At his funeral one of the passages chosen was that text from 1 Corinthians 15. Instead of reading it, the pastor played the recording from that Sunday morning, so that those gathered to celebrate the life of Cook Kimball heard in his strong, clear voice:[[2]](#endnote-2)

*If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain…. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*

It was as if he was bearing testimony to the truth of what he read that day! For, that is what he read and what he believed and what he proclaimed – in life and in death! That is what we proclaim this glorious Easter day, my brothers and sisters. Dare to believe it! Dare to hope in it! Dare to proclaim it! Dare to live it faithfully, hopefully, lovingly, joyfully! For, our faith is not in vain. Christ has been raised. *It’s true! Our Lord and Savior lives, he is risen from the dead!* So says Cook Kimball. So says Paul. So say our confirmands. So say saints across the ages. What say you? Alleluia! Amen

1. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans: 2002, p.50 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Fleming Rutledge, *The Undoing of Death*, William B. Eerdmans: 2002, p.327-328 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)