The story I am about to read is not new. We can’t act surprised, as if this were the first time we have heard it. Many of us probably know every detail of this story by heart. It’s over 2000 years old. It’s the account of the resurrection of Christ from the Gospel of John.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb.

4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ 14 When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

15 Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ 16 Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and...
said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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Years ago, I did something pretty risky, maybe even stupid. I don’t know. It was my first Easter as the pastor of Myers Park Presbyterian Church in Charlotte. I had only been there 8 or 9 months. So, I start the Easter sermon by stating the New York Times had published an article yesterday declaring archeologists had discovered the bones of Christ. There was a high rate of certainty they were his bones. So I pointed out if this were true, everything changes.

If they found the bones of Christ, then he died. If he died, there is no resurrection. (Remember this is Easter Sunday…family, flowers, visitors, music, the whole thing!) If they found the bones of Christ, was he really the Son of God? Was the whole thing a hoax?

People were squirming in their Easter bonnets! How could this be? Did they really find his bones? What does this mean? It was pretty tense. I was convincing!

And then, at the end of the sermon, just as I exhausted every possible thing that would not be true, if they had found the bones of Christ, I paused and said; “But they didn’t find the bones of Christ, and they never will. He is risen!” End of sermon. (End of Steve’s career!)

They felt duped. Even though in the end I tried to put everything back on the shelf in its rightful place, I had messed with their Easter.

I learned a lot from that sermon!
1. Don’t ever do it again!
2. People don’t like to be played the fool.
3. Folks don’t appreciate you messing with their Easter.
4. And you can get fired after 8 or 9 months! (I didn’t, but I think some of them thought it would be a good idea!)

One thing for sure, none of us ever forgot it!

* 

You can’t mess around with Easter. We know this story up one side and down another. A dead body, an opened tomb, angels, gardeners, grave clothes scattered around…it’s all there. Just tell the story and get out of the way. It’s Easter! But is that enough?
Are we just telling a story in history, like the 4th of July? Is this a day to remember something that happened a long, long time ago in a place far, far away? That’s good for those who were there, but what about us? Is that enough for us?

Or is this some sort of re-enactment, like folks re-enact the Civil War? We put on new clothes, ramp up the music and retell the same story every year. Is that enough?

Try telling this story to someone who is outside the Christian faith.

“Ok, so there was this guy who was crucified. They buried him. But a few days later some women go out there in the dark to anoint his body. They find the grave open and he is gone! And there are a couple of angels hanging around who assure everybody things are OK.”

Is that it?

“No. This guy, who was dead, shows back up, but no one recognizes him. He doesn’t look like his old self. But when he speaks, they know him. Then he shows up behind locked doors but later disappears. Oh, and even though he doesn’t look like himself, he still has the scars from the nails being driven into his hands at crucifixion.”

So, is that it?

“Nope. He doesn’t show himself to anybody but to the people who believed in him in the first place. Then he stays around for 50 days, until he floats up into a cloud and that’s it!”

And this is what you Christians believe?

“Yes. That’s pretty much it. Throw in a bunny and some candy and you got it!”

* * *

So is my faith, my relationship with God, really based on this story? In fact, it is. This “guy” who was crucified, wasn’t just a guy. He was God in human flesh. And that may sound just as strange as all the rest, but that’s what makes this more than history, more than a re-enactment, more than a myth. We crucified God in Christ.

So for Jesus to be risen from the dead, after what we did, is the ultimate expression of God’s love and forgiveness. This crazy story tells me where I stand with God. It tells us where we all stand with God.

* * *

Easter is not so much about marveling over the miracle of raising somebody from the dead. Don’t get wooed by the miracle. If God created 100 million galaxies, raising one guy from the dead is no challenge. It’s not that God could raise Jesus from the dead, it’s that God would raise Jesus from the dead.

Today is not about how powerful God is. Today is about how loving God is. We tried killing that love, and we can’t. That’s what today is about.
If I were to tell this story to someone outside the Christian faith, that would be the most important part. The resurrection is about this; You can’t kill the love of God. We’ve tried.

Tell that to someone in prison, or to someone addicted. You can’t kill the love of God.

Or tell it to someone who worships their wealth and prosperity above all else. There are many ways to try to kill the love of God!

Tell it to the lonely, to the marginalized, to those who are oppressed, but also to the oppressors. You can’t kill the love of God.

Tell it to those who grieve.

Or you may even be the one who needs to hear it. You can’t kill the love of God. We’ve all tried!

So “this guy” gets 12 other guys to follow him, and that turns into 120 men and women before his departure. The 120 turn into 2.3 billion people today. That 2.3 billion are spread throughout the world. How did that happen? By retelling history? Maybe with a re-enactment? Perhaps by perpetuating a myth. No. It’s a relationship. This “guy,” this Son of God, got up from the dead to offer us new life. He is loose in the world, and has been for a very, very long time. You won’t find his bones, but he will find your heart.

He is risen! He is risen indeed!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen.