

Easter 2018

4/1/2018

1 Corinthians 15:55

“O Death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”

Today is Easter, the most religious of Christian Holidays. It is a holy day, honoring a miracle that defines our religion, what we believe, and how we look at ourselves and life. And then shortly after this holy service, we will gather in the park where later the children will look for Easter eggs deposited by a bunny. I think this is wonderful. God is equally present in both ceremonies.

What defines Christianity is not the birth of Christ, but the rebirth, symbolized by the egg. Christianity is about the renewal, regeneration, and the affirmation of Life through Christ. That was the message that Christ came to deliver; the defining moment for Christianity is what happened regarding the resurrection.

And what did happen? All we know about the resurrection is found in the Bible. Over time we have come to accept a story that is an amalgamation of the various Books. I say amalgamation because the authors do not agree in the details of what happened.

For instance: it is a fact that it was not until the 9th decade that there is anything written about Jesus physically walking out of a tomb, resurrected and taking on life again. Paul, who wrote in the 5th decade does not mention this. Mark, writing in the 6th decade makes no reference to a physical appearance of a risen Jesus.

Matthew has two accounts – one involving the women at the tomb, which appears to be a physical reference, and another account in Galilee involving a disciple, which seems to be more of a vision, more spiritual. It is only in Luke and John, which are written in the 9th and 10th decades, that the resurrection story firms into a definite physical resurrection.

Over time, from the 2nd century on, when the basics of early Christianity were being finalized, it is the later contributions of Luke and John that would form the now common story that we hold to be Easter.

Yet there are still discrepancies over the details surrounding the Easter Story. Was there or was there not a tomb in a garden? According to Paul, the earliest contributor to the New Testament, there is no mention of a tomb at all. Acts 13:29 implies that Jesus was buried by the same people who killed him. *And when they had fulfilled all that was written of him, they took him down from the tree, and laid him in a sepulchre.*

From the study of research historians we know that in conquered Judea it was unheard of for a convicted and executed felon (which Jesus was) to receive an elaborate burial. They were usually placed in a shallow grave with the other criminals executed that day and covered with a thin layer of earth.

In today's Easter Story, there is a part where women go to the tomb of Jesus on the first day of the week. Again, Paul, the earliest

story teller in the New Testament, makes no mention of women or a tomb. The Gospels all do, yet they disagree with who the women were and the number. Mark has three women, Matthew two, Luke has five or six...not really clear, and John only one.

Did the women see the risen Lord on that first Easter morning? Mark says no; Matthew says yes; Luke says no; and John says yes.

Other examples of disagreement can be offered, but regardless of the details and what actually happened, this we know – something dramatic and life-changing occurred. It was enough to totally change the way the disciples thought, acted and reacted. Whatever happened empowered them to take up the cause and teachings of Jesus and gave them courage to face persecution and even martyrdom. Whatever happened compelled them to move forward, unwavering in their conviction that they could not be separated from the God that they believed they had met in Jesus. To try to describe what they felt and had experienced they used phrases like “We have seen the Lord,” “Death cannot contain him.”

Also changed in them was how they perceived God. For a Jew, which they all were, they must never bow their heads to anything other than the one holy God. The death of Jesus, however, transformed these Jewish disciples’ understanding into the awareness that Jesus could not be separated from God. Thomas says, “You are my Lord and my God,” a remarkable realization in the mind of a Jew.

Additionally, within just a single generation the Christian Sunday became as holy a day as the Jewish Sabbath. These sorts of changes – sacred worship traditions, shifts of consciousness, changes in personalities and theology – do not come without a deeply felt motivation.

Regardless of what we can point our analytic fingers toward ... something profound happened to the disciples, and whatever it was created a shift in Christ-awareness, in the same way we experience spiritual awakening ... as an inner movement, an inner knowing; a light that reveals our true spiritual essence. We understand, that like the Christ spirit within us, we can never be separated from God. It is our ignorance that perpetuates the idea of separation.

Spiritual ignorance lies deep within a person; it is an attitude, a willingness to turn our face away from the Creator, away from the light that dares to shine. Often, we are not even conscious of this shift away from God. We can hope for perfect reunification only after we realize that we have ignored God's Presence.

But how do we move from our deeply engrained survival thinking to our higher awareness? We allow the inner Christ to once again breathe the Holy Spirit into our hearts. We accept the love from God and understand that we can never be separate from Spirit.

It is the message that Christ came to share. Even in our trials we are not separate from God; we cannot be. We, our true selves, who we truly are, cannot be destroyed ... not death, pain, struggle, or

turning our face away from God willingly ... we cannot be separated from God.

Despite our challenges, victimhood remains our choice; persecution is a choice. Jesus suffered the crucifixion, and we suffer our own crucifixions. We are not nailed to a cross, but we crucify ourselves with self-contempt. We get overwhelmed; we allow judgment, criticism, resentments, insults to crucify us. We allow this persecution to disable us, and we stay there by choice.

Jesus, although he hung on a cross not by his choosing, still did not choose persecution. Those are our judgments as to what was happening to him. His body was definitely tortured, but HE was unaffected; he was beyond anything the world could do to him.

That is what is meant by the ancient hymn, “He trampled over death by death” – in dying he demonstrated mastery over death and although the body may expire, the spirit cannot; although the lamp may fall and break, the Light cannot be extinguished.

Through love alone we gather up all the corners of the trials we endure and tuck them neatly into a perfect wholeness. That is what the resurrection means to us. We are not our deficiencies; the Christ can help us rise above them, and through love turn them into something miraculous.

Once we understand the truth about ourselves – that we cannot be separated from God and that the Christ within is trying to express

through us fully – then we no longer look upon ourselves as unworthy victims. We are whole and every part of us is useful to God’s expression.

The story of Christ Jesus teaches us that there truly is no death; the body may succumb, but Spirit persists. And more than that, Christ within us persists, pulling us, guiding us ever onward – daring us to shine our Light of Love onto every soul we meet; renewing our attitudes and thoughts; giving us the courage to face our trials from God’s perspective; empowering us to serve in new ways, and compelling us to move forward, unwavering in our conviction toward the goals God has placed upon our hearts.

James Faust wrote: *A rebirth out of spiritual adversity causes us to become new creatures.*

The might and promise of Christ lies not in his crucifixion, but in his resurrection. That is where Christ wants to express power through us: as rebirth, renewal, transformation, overcoming, and rising up. I pray that on this Easter we celebrate the renewing of life and allow the triumphant Christ to rise within us as a new awakening. May we find Spirit’s expression of peace, love, power, and joy through Easter both in the contemplation of Christ as well as when we bite off the heads of those chocolate marshmallow-filled Easter bunnies.

Let us pray