

“He is Risen” – Ben Wayman

Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-18

He is Risen. He is Risen. He is Risen. Once a year, every year of my childhood, these same words would jar me from a deep sleep. And the words would come from my dad's mouth at 4:00 in the morning, and they would hit me like a shot of adrenaline. I loved Easter Sunday. Easter was the day we were allowed to wake up so early that we beat the sun up. We got up this early because it was our job to set up for our church's sunrise service on the cliffs of Shoreline Park, which overlooked Leadbetter beach.

In Santa Barbara, we have a lot of fog. Fog not only makes it difficult to see, but it also brings bucket loads of dew to sit atop each blade of grass. After setting up the second row of chairs on the park lawn, my shoes and socks would, predictably, be thoroughly soaked. As my feet squished around in my shoes, I was reminded again how foggy it was at 4:00 in the morning.

But that it was 4:00 in the morning also reminded me how exciting Easter Sunday was. It was the day all the rules were broken. For example, it was the day we had church at the park.

What was great about church at the park was that you could watch the ocean instead of the pastor. What was great about church at the park was that you could eat a donut instead of color quietly in a pew. What was great about church in the park was that you could sing songs about Jesus at the top of your lungs and hope that all the joggers, walkers, and yogis would hear and sing along. (At least, I thought this was great until I hit my teens; then it was just embarrassing.) All those years of soaking in the fog, excitement and confession of Easter Sunday taught me that Christians, if we are anything, we are a resurrection people.

Today I'd like to talk about what it means to be a resurrection people. I'd like to suggest that being a resurrection people means at least two things. 1) To be a resurrection people means being confused. 2) It means being confessors.

Confusion

It's easy to think, as Christians, that when we are confused by something we read in the Bible, or something we experience in life that shakes our faith, or something we don't understand in the Apostle's Creed, that we are pretty much alone. But actually, we're in good company. Confused is what Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the beloved disciple were when they saw the empty tomb.

Where is Jesus? Has he been moved? What the heck happened? Being confused is an uncomfortable place to be.

Confusion can so overpower us that we respond in some pretty odd ways. Confused that the stone had been removed from the tomb, Mary goes and tells her friends what she herself hasn't confirmed, that Jesus' body has been moved from the tomb.

In response, also clearly confused, Peter and the other disciple don't go and investigate places where Jesus might have been laid, but they return to the place where Mary just told them Jesus would not be found. And after finding exactly what Mary told them to be the case, they went back to their homes, no doubt, extremely confused.

I want to be clear here – I'm not coming down on the disciples. I think their confusion is well warranted and I'm suggesting this morning that this is what it means to be a resurrection people.

I think it's an indication of the disciples' confusion that they ran to the tomb. I wonder how far they ran. I wonder how long it took them to get there and I wonder if adrenaline carried them the whole way. The way I read the story, their heads were spinning in a fog of confusion and excitement as they ran.

They know that if Jesus's body is not in the tomb that something big has happened. And if something big has happened they should definitely do something, and do it quickly. The problem is, they don't know what has happened and they don't know what to do. So they take off running.

Picture a group of three year olds at a birthday party, loaded up on cake. They likely don't have a clue why they're all of a sudden allowed to eat so much sugar and make so much noise blowing their party horns. As the sugar rushes into their bloodstream, their confusion reaches its tipping point and needs to be released. There's only one thing to do in such a situation: run around in circles and scream. At least Peter and the other disciple ran somewhere, even if it is the place where Mary just told them Jesus was not to be found.

So, I think that highlighting the disciples' confusion, and our own, is a helpful and honest way to think about the Christian life. Like the disciples, we know something big has happened, but we're not quite sure what it all means. We can only hope that we're not running around circles. But there's no question about it; part of being a resurrection people means that some of the time, perhaps most of the time, we're confused.

Take death, for instance. Have you ever looked deep into the tomb?

A year ago my maternal grandparents both died, within 24 hours of each other. Because they died so closely together, we held a joint funeral. Their funeral was the first time I really looked at death. There I stood, in front of their open caskets, staring at death for what seemed like a

lifetime. I was a bit surprised to find that I could not bring myself to touch their bodies. There's so much terror and confusion surrounding death that I found myself beyond my depth, and I couldn't see the bottom.

At funerals people say all sorts of strange things. They say things like: "that's not really them, that's just their bodies." Things like: "at least they're in a better place now." Things like: "they look so peaceful." Trying to bring comfort, such people think they need to pretend they're not confused.

But part of being a resurrection people, I think, is being able to say: I'm confused about death. I don't know how I'm to respond to it, and I'm terrified by it. But this is what I believe about it: God has conquered death. God's story, and our place in it, goes on. God raised Jesus from the dead and in so doing, broke the grip of death.

But we take this on faith. People die. Friends and family die. Death is painful, and it's confusing. But as a resurrection people, we believe that just as God raised Jesus from the dead, he will do the same for us. This is what our reading from Colossians is all about. Here the author is trying to explain what the resurrection means.

And what it means is not only that Christ has been raised, but we have been raised. By conquering death, Christ has given us a new life in him. The four verses in our readings from Colossians today are a metaphysical mindtrip. And it's okay to be confused about how exactly God gives us life in Christ. But believe the good news: our destiny is tied to Christ. What happened to Christ has happened to us. It's confusing, but it's true.

One of the criticisms I hear most often about infant baptism is that babies have no understanding of what's happening. There's something to this criticism: it's good for us to be mindful of the significance of our baptism; when we understand its meaning, we're more likely to change the way we live.

But this critique misses a key point about baptism. Baptism doesn't have meaning because we are able to understand it. It has meaning because in baptism, God adopts us as his children. This is what it means to be the church: the church describes the people who have been adopted by God to be his children and to live as a divine family.

A similar analogy can be made with Communion. We don't have to understand all that's going on in Communion for it to have meaning. When we receive Communion we receive Christ's body. We eat the Bread of Life.

We don't have to understand the physiology of digestion in order to be nourished by fruit and vegetables. Whether we understand it or not, we'll be nourished just the same. This, I think, is the best way to think about the sacraments. If you don't quite understand all of what's

happening in Communion, that's okay; be confused with the rest of us and come and receive Christ.

Confessor

Everything I've said thus far about being confused is closely tied to being confessors. Being a confessor is about being honest about the things we believe to be true. Our job as witnesses is to tell the truth about what we see. And sometimes, we understand what we see. But even if we don't understand it all, part of being a resurrection people means being honest about our confusion about what we believe.

In verse nine of our Gospel reading today, we're told "as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." But in the previous verse, we're told that the other disciple "went in, and he saw and believed." What did he believe, then, if he didn't understand the scripture about Jesus' resurrection?

St. Augustine says he believed Mary Magdalene: Jesus' body, indeed, has been moved. Some commentators suggest that he believed that Jesus had conquered death, but didn't know that meant resurrection. I think we have here an example of the difference between belief and understanding.

Peter, in our Acts reading, is a perfect example of this. Peter clearly believed that Christ had been raised from the dead, and that this meant big things. But he was not clear about what those things were. Peter states that now "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Peter had to learn that salvation is for the world, not just for the Jews.

What this means for us is that we should not allow our confusion or lack of understanding to keep us from confessing the faith. Don't allow your confusion to paralyze you. Rather, be humbled by your confusion and be courageous in your confession.

The Christian life is about belief more than understanding. Understanding is a great thing, but it's a luxury. Belief is what is required of a resurrection people. By "belief" I don't mean having a tight theological system down pat. What I mean by belief is something more like trust. And this means that belief is often covered in a thick fog of confusion.

To be clear, I'm not making an argument against education or a thinking faith. What I am saying is that being confused is common for us Christians and the sooner we admit this, I think, the more compelling our witness.

After Peter admitted his misunderstanding about God being only for the Jewish people he baptized an entire Gentile household. Roman households were big; they included everyone from the patriarch to the kids to the slaves. Had Peter been deluded enough to think that he

had everything figured out, he would not have been able to see what God was doing among Cornelius and his friends.

My son Caden and I recently came across a squirrel that had been flattened in the middle of Durley Street. My wife and I had been a bit concerned about Caden's understanding of death and so I thought that I would take advantage of the situation.

After inspecting the squirrel for a few minutes, I asked Caden, do you think we should pray for it? Caden quickly volunteered. He prayed: "Dear God, We found a squirrel that's dead and we think a car ran over its head. Please help the squirrel to come alive. Amen." As we walked away, Caden kept looking over his shoulder, expecting to see the squirrel spring to life and scamper up a tree.

Caden may be confused about death, but he believes God has conquered it.

To be a resurrection people means that we give witness to what we see. And we learn how to see the truth of the resurrection after we have learned to say that God has conquered death. And Easter Sunday, in a community of resurrection people is when we Christians learn to say, He is Risen. He is Risen. He is Risen.