

From Question Mark to Exclamation Point
John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011
Northbrook United Methodist Church
Pastor Melissa Earley

The other night my husband Corey exclaimed with glee! They have an Easter one! That's right. Angry Birds came up with an Easter game. If you play Angry Birds you know that it's game on the iphone and ipad in which you use a slingshot to hurl birds at pigs. It's a surprisingly fun game. Well now there's an Easter edition. In this edition the pigs wear bunny ears and if you hit baskets of decorated eggs you get additional points. I guess I should be thankful that angry birds doesn't have Jesus hurtling through the air on a cross, but according to angry birds, Easter is about bunnies and eggs.

You're here, I suspect, because you know that Easter is about more than Easter bunnies and decorated eggs. You know that it's about more than chocolate candy and going out to brunch (though that is a great part of Easter!) Once we strip away all the hallmark cards and Walmart candy, once we take away the boys who fidget in their suits and uncomfortable shoes and the girls who twirl in their Sunday best, once we take away the music and the flowers and connecting with friends -- Easter is about this proclamation -- Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed. Alleluia! It's the sort of sentence that moves from period to exclamation mark to multiple exclamation marks. Just the way it's written it grows in good news!

But I think for many of us the proclamation is more of an inquiry, and instead of an exclamation mark or even a period we put a question mark -- Christ is risen? Christ is risen, indeed? Alleluia?

Skepticism and doubt are reasonable responses to the resurrection. Certainly Mary Magdalene and the disciples reacted with doubt and resistance. When Mary Magdalene first discovered the empty tomb she didn't immediately assume that Jesus was risen from the dead. When Mary saw the two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been she only asks where his body is. And when she saw the risen Christ she didn't even know him, she thought he was the gardener.

Once Mary knew that it was actually Jesus, she ran and told the disciples. Did they react with shouts of joy and songs and dances? Did they run out and gloat to the Roman authorities? No. They stayed locked in a house for fear until Jesus appeared to them.

We understand their doubt and skepticism. We understand their resistance and wondering. We experience that too. Have you ever sat in church and looked at the person on each side of you to see if they really believe it? Do they really believe that Christ is risen? For some of us our skepticism comes from the strangeness of the story. Come on. Jesus died on a cross. He was buried in a tomb. And then he rose from the dead. What?!? How could that be possible? What happened to the body later – I mean where did it go? He ascended into heaven –so where is it?

And so we say, Christ is risen? Indeed?

I think our resistance to the resurrection runs deeper than our practical questions about Jesus' body. I think our resistance to the resurrection is connected to our longing for the resurrection to be true, and our fear of being disappointed and found foolish.

Death is so final, after all -- especially this kind of death. A good man was killed by a collusion between the religious and civil authorities. A man who proclaimed love was

murdered because the world couldn't handle that love. "The crucifixion was the cost of proclaiming grace."ⁱ Grace is the gift of God's love. In Jesus God showed us her love. In Jesus God put divine love in human terms. In Jesus we see that God's love seeks all, welcomes all, accepts all. In Jesus we see that divine love is offered not because of who we are but because of who God is. We see that in the eyes of God, all are created equally good and all are equally broken – sinner and saint, stock broker and stock boy, winner and waitress, divorced and long partnered, drug dealer and PTA president. Good people don't like being told that their goodness doesn't make them any more special to God than bad people. Good people don't like being told that they haven't earned their place in God's heart and that place is a gift of God's grace. And so those good people murdered Jesus – proving their need for divine grace and forgiveness.

Maybe it was hard for Mary to believe Jesus could have been raised because his death confirmed what she knew of the world—that evil wins, that those who preach and live love are really patsies who won't ever get ahead, that world's standards for winning are the only standards that matter. No wonder she didn't recognize the risen Christ when he approached her in the garden. Her own doubt, and grief kept her from seeing what was right in front of her. But then Jesus said her name, Mary, and she knew him. In that moment her hope was restored, and she was saved.

For some of us, our resistance is because we don't deserve it. Some of Jesus' closest friends abandoned him at the end. Judas betrayed him. Peter pretended he didn't know him. All ran away and hid. No wonder they couldn't believe the resurrection. Their guilt and shame hid the truth from their eyes. How could he come back to them? If God did raise him from the

dead, why would he show up among them – those whose feet he had washed who had denied and betrayed him? But he did. He showed up and instead of blame or recrimination he said, “peace.” And they were saved. “Now by salvation, I mean much more than a ticket to heaven. I mean much more than being cleansed of our sins and rescued from hell’s fire. I mean even more than being raised from the grave and granted eternal life. By salvation, I mean being freed of every obstacle to intimacy with God. We will know as we are known and love as we are loved.”ⁱⁱ

God in Christ was willing to do whatever it took to restore those broken relationships. The story of Jesus’ resurrection is a constant unfolding of revelation. God did whatever it took to restore the relationships that had been broken.

“God did something glorious in Jesus. His resurrection settled once and for all the question of God’s attitude toward his children. God has determined to love and redeem. In the crucifixion we said no to God, but in the resurrection God rejected our rejection. This is the triumph of grace.”ⁱⁱⁱ

God rejected our rejection!!!

It is because Mary and the other followers of Jesus had an experience of the triumph of God’s love in their lives that they could move from Christ is risen? Indeed? To, “Christ is risen! Indeed!!! Alleluia!!!!”

What would it be like if you moved from question mark to exclamation point? How would your life be different? If the love of God has the power to triumph over every obstacle to intimacy with God and you experienced that in your life, how would your life be different? What difference does the resurrection make in your life?

I meet with a group of clergy to talk about sermons about every other week and we met this past week in Starbucks right on Cherry there across from Sunset. And we asked each other that question. There's something profound about talking about Jesus' death and resurrection in the middle of a coffee shop. I could see the woman just one seat away from us kind of lean back in her chair to listen in.

My colleagues said things like being freed of the tyranny of the self, having the courage to follow Jesus even when it got hard, knowing that there is hope even when life is really bad. That question has stuck with me this week. It's like a song I can't get out of my head. One of many differences the proclamation, Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed, Alleluia, has made in my life happened because of my father's diagnosis with Alzheimer's. When I was 23 my father, who was 62, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's. That's a pretty devastating diagnosis for anyone. My father was a doctor, a really smart guy. I know he was smart because he could translate doctor language to everyday language for the average person. He was the guy in our church that other church members called to get a diagnosis explained to them. I remember hearing him on the phone with someone and with great compassion he answered their questions. And then he would coach them on what to ask the doctor and how to advocate for themselves or their husband and wife. Of course, he wasn't so great at helping me and my sister with chemistry homework – boy did that lead to some fights.

Alzheimer's is never an easy thing. That diagnosis was a pretty scary time for my dad, and for my mom too. We weren't a family that talked about our feelings a lot, but my dad shared his fear a bit with me. He talked about how awful it was to watch someone with dementia lose it. I could see he dreaded that, dreaded being a burden and forgetting who he

was. As he lost himself my sister and I told him stories about himself. I did that???? He would say. That's strange – to remind your parent of who they were.

I remember one day sitting at the kitchen table with my dad. He was still at home so it was just a few years into his diagnosis, and he told me that he done some things in his life that he wasn't proud of. It's strange to hear your father confess. They weren't things that had anything to do with me or my family, but they bothered him. One of them was that in college he had cheated on an exam, and so had earned a grade in that class that was higher than one that he deserved. Because of that higher grade he got into Phi Beta Kappa. He said he always felt like his Phi Beta Kappa key was something he hadn't deserved.

My heart broke for him. We prayed together. I asked God that my father would know he was forgiven. I think he did experience God's forgiveness.

I have his key. I was Phi Beta Kappa and he gave me his key when I was inducted. I wear it periodically. Not to show off that I was Phi Beta Kappa and know the secret handshake, but in honor of my father – who is redeemed.

As I thought about that experience this week, I am struck by how long my father carried the guilt about that test. If asked at any time during his life I am certain my dad would have said that God loved him. And yet, it took decades for him to receive that gift of love and forgiveness for this one part of his life. In the gospel the Risen Christ doesn't appear just once and expect people to get it right off the bat. He comes back to his followers multiple times, offering love and hope and grace every single time, removing obstacles to intimacy every single time. So that we can move from saying "Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed?" to knowing "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!! Alleulia!"

ⁱ (Gulley & Mulholland, 2004) p. 137
ⁱⁱ (Gulley & Mulholland, 2004) p. 8
ⁱⁱⁱ (Gulley & Mulholland, 2004) p. 140