

## EASTER: HOPE & COURAGE

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Resurrection Sunday - April 24, 2011  
First Congregational Church (UCC) of Colorado Springs  
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“Then Simon Peter came... and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.”  
-John 20:6-7

### I.

This past week, I heard a question asked by a young girl in our church: Why is everyone so happy on Easter if Jesus died? I think that is a really good question. It may be *the* Easter question. What could possibly have happened between Friday and Sunday to move the people from sadness to joy, from weeping to dancing?

I know that some of you are thinking you know the answer to her question. That’s easy, you’re thinking: He rose from the dead, you would say, and you would be right. On Easter, we celebrate the resurrection, God’s raising of Jesus from death to life. But do you ever get the feeling that we have grown too familiar with phrases like “He rose from the dead” or “Christ is risen”? You might call it the peril of familiarity. We become familiar with a set of words, then toss it around as if it were common knowledge.

Imagine approaching a friend, someone you know that just lost a loved one. You say with a sympathetic voice, “How are you?” They say, “I never imagined that joy and hope was possible.” “Huh?” you say, “didn’t she just die last Friday.” “Yeah,” your friend replies, “but I went to the funeral home this morning and her body was gone. I was alarmed at first. Who took her? Where did they put her? But then someone walked in and said, ‘It’s okay, she got up and walked away. She said she’ll see you soon.’ Sure enough, I was at the grocery store just a few hours ago and there she was. We talked for awhile, she told me she loved me, and then said, ‘I’ll see you around.’” You look at your friend. “‘I’ll see you around’?” “Yeah, wait till you see her. She looks great!”

Christ is risen! Really? Does that sound like an adequate answer to the girl's question: Why is everyone so happy on Easter if Jesus died? Familiar answers can be perilous because familiarity pretends to be certainty. And while you may have faith that "Christ is risen," it is the kind of claim about which there can be no absolute certainty. Confidence yes, but if you hold "Christ is risen" too tightly, it will slip out of your fingers like a wet bar of soap.

## II.

When we think of the early church, the communities of people who told and retold the Jesus story until it was written down, we can be tempted to think that it must have been easier for them to believe than for us. Some of them, after all, were eye witnesses to what had happened. Others heard directly from those who were there. Still others were blessed by gifted storytellers who could evoke details in just the right way so that you felt like had been there.

But perhaps it was *harder* for them because it had just happened. And the "it" that had just happened wasn't clothed with words or gospel or doctrine or familiarity. Maybe it's easier for *us* to believe, or to discount, what happened because the story has become so familiar and because we cannot help but look backwards through the lenses of scripture, doctrines and statements of belief. When the first person uttered, "Christ is risen," those words must have gone off like a bombshell. Now we barely notice their power, like the words, "Nice day, huh?," words with which you could easily agree or disagree.

An amazing thing about the first accounts of the resurrection is that they preserve the concussive shocks of that event as they rippled through the early communities. They preserve the dismay, the disbelief, and the fear. They preserve the confusion and the grief.

They preserve the questions, which remain our questions to this day. The first questions were: What the heck happened? Where was his body? What was going on?

The second wave of questions came when people started seeing the risen Christ. Did you really see him? Was it really him? How do you know? What

did he look like? What did he do? What did he say? When do I get to see him?

The third wave of questions asked by the early Christians concerned how to live with the audacious claim that Christ is risen? As Chuck Campbell observes: The Gospels wrestle with a question not unlike many church members ask today: How do I come into the presence of Jesus now that he has been raised? Isn't that a great question?

And yet the modern church has been responding to it with a set of propositions. Do you believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead? Yes or no. But believing doesn't come from answering yes or no to a question like that. Belief in the risen Christ comes from an experience of the risen Christ. The early church recorded their experiences in the Gospels that we, their spiritual descendents, might hear the story again and come to believe, that is, that we might come into the presence of Jesus now that he has been raised.

### III.

In John's account, the experience of the risen Christ is symbolized by a seemingly unnecessary and confusing detail in the story. You could call this the promise of the familiar. Mundane details, so easy to dismiss, are little clues placed in plain view by our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith, egging us on toward belief. It's as if they are saying, "Trust me and my experience, and then trust your own."

Here's the detail to which I'm referring. Did you notice the cloths? Mary is the first at the tomb. The stone is rolled away, but she does not go in. She runs to tell the disciples. Two of them run to the tomb. The first arrives, looks in, and notices the linen wrappings, the graveclothes, lying there. Then Peter arrives and looks in. The details become clearer: the linen wrappings are there, but also something else. The text says: "The cloth that had been on Jesus' head, [was] not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself."

What could this detail mean, and why had it become lodged in the mind of early church? In Greek, the word for the linen wrappings is *othonia*, a word used only here and in Luke's account of the empty tomb. But the word for the headcloth, *soudarion*, is found in one other place in John's

gospel. When Lazarus is raised from the dead, and when he walks out of the tomb, his face is wrapped in a *soudarion*. Jesus sees him and says, “Unbind him, and let him go.”

In using the same word in these two stories, the community of John is making a statement, planting a clue for us. When Lazarus came forth from the tomb, Jesus commanded those who were there: Unbind him, and let him go.” The power of God in Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. Lazarus needed the gathered community to assist in the unbinding and the freeing of this one to whom death was still clinging.

But on that bright Easter morning, the tomb was empty, save for the graveclothes and headcloth. The details answer Mary’s concern that they have taken him and we don’t know where. To that worry, the text responds, They didn’t take him anywhere. He is not longer lying down. Death no longer clings to him. He has left it behind. The graveclothes left behind, and the headcloth carefully rolled up and placed aside, no longer necessary for one who now lives.

The story of the resurrection proclaims God’s victory over death, a once and for all victory. He is not here in the place of death. Death no longer clings to him. The promise of new life in this world and all future worlds has been secured through the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Take heart, be courageous. Here is the source of your hope. While death still clings to us, Christ has overcome it.

#### IV.

Why is everyone so happy on Easter if Jesus died? Because on Easter, death is not longer the final word of life. Death has been made penultimate to a word of new life. The great poet John Donne knew this. He who hung a picture of himself as a corpse over his headboard wrote “Death, be not proud, for thou shalt die.”

Why is everyone so happy on Easter if Jesus died? Because we need no longer fear death. As Paul once wrote: “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Do you know what that means. It’s Paul’s way of looking at death and saying “nya-nya-nya-nya-nya”.

Why is everyone so happy on Easter if Jesus died? Because now we have a charge, a purpose, a responsibility, to be the people of the resurrection, to be those who carry the old story forward, to be those who plant clues for the ones who will come after us. Jesus is raised while death still clings to many. It is the role of the church to live into its freedom from death. Freed from death, we are free to follow Jesus' command: Unbind people. Set them free. Christ is risen, risen indeed. Alleluia, alleluia indeed.