

Easter: No Bones about It
 April 8, 2007, Mark 16: 1-8
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And when the sabbath was past, Mary Mag'dalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salo'me, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.
 And very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen.
 And they were saying to one another,
 "Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?"
 And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back; -- it was very large.
 And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed.
 And he said to them, "Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him.
 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you."
 And they went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

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Jesus is Risen! Do you hear that?

Three women walk the duty road, doing what women do,
 caring for the dead,
 prepared to anoint the body of a loved one.
 Overcome with grief,
 unsure who will help them move the stone protecting Jesus' grave,
 they discover to their amazement
 The stone has been rolled away
 Then an angel confirms the deed, he is not here, he is risen.
 Amazing!

The Gospel of Mark proclaims the resurrection of Jesus; yet, truth be told, his story doesn't prove a thing, even though Matthew and Luke and John embellished it in their own words. Mark's story is a good story, but that's all it is; a dramatic retelling of an improbable and amazing moment. So I'm curious, what draws you here today, the Jesus story or your story? I hope it's a little of both!

Or maybe it's all the other stories you've been hearing this year? You know the one about Jesus and Mary Magdalene and their son, what was his name, now? Oh yes, I remember "Holy Grail." In case you wonder...I read the book, [The DaVinci Code], loved it in fact. I saw the movie, liked it too and yet; I still believe Jesus is risen.

Maybe you saw James Cameron's documentary on Jesus' tomb and the discovery of Jesus' bones. In Toronto several years ago I actually got to see the so-called James ossuary when I attended a joint conference of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical literature. The exhibit was well done but the developing story is this: the ossuary was determined to be a forgery and a court case is still pending. Still I believe Jesus is risen.

Back to the bones of Jesus and Cameron's film: Biblical Scholar Don Sausa has a new book coming out, *The Jesus Tomb: Is It Fact or Fiction?* His conclusion, "Our review of the evidence, DNA findings, statistical analysis, and personal interviews of the experts used in the film clearly show that the claims are largely based on speculation and hype."

Surprise, surprise! Stories about the real fate of Jesus and his bones will no doubt continue year after year with many twists and turns. Even so, I still believe, Jesus is Risen. **Easter is real, no bones about it!**

I tell you this, not because I know it's what you want to hear. Or because I get paid handsomely to preach on Easter morning (I do actually). I tell you this because the Easter story is more than bones, more than words and more than hype to me. It wasn't always the case, as many of you have heard me say. Many an Easter morning, I woke up with no sunrise in sight. Everyone else seemed to see it but I could not. My vision was clouded by years of depression and fear. Some would say I faked it pretty well. But I wasn't faking a thing; I was simply living on the witness of others, for whom the Easter story had become the real story of their lives. I was living their story until I had the strength and vision to live mine.

People like my grandmother and mother who dragged me to church, even when I didn't want to go. They insisted I experience the community of the church because they knew Easter is about the unexpected, about radical amazement, and about joy that must be experienced first-hand. People like Roger Hazelton who endured the suicide of his oldest son and still continued to teach his theology students about graceful courage and the amazing power of grace to greaten our lives—to make them larger than we ourselves ever could if left to our own devices.

People like psychologist, Andy Canale, who endured a hellish Halloween evening while a student at Notre Dame in the 1970's. That night, for reasons he did not understand a sense of unreality came over him. He wrote in the preface of his book *Understanding the Human Jesus* that while attending a movie he reached a point where life seemed in his own words "tenuous, delicate and with a feeble grasp on me". He was terrified, fearing that he was going mad... again his own words, "insanity battled heart attack for possession of me." Year's later he would write, these very personal words... "Jesus was the human vehicle and expression of my encounter with God. He has helped me, he has saved me; I was dead and am now alive. The theological questions [of Jesus' divinity and humanity] are moot."

Over a ten year period, Andy would *save* my life, as I too struggled with the stranglehold of fear that had enveloped me. There are others, too, like Ann Feaver, who having been steeped in the Jesus story were able to share their story and save my life, help me rise above my fears, the wounds of my personal story and grace me with new life.

That's the real Easter of story...isn't it? Isn't that why you are here today...someone saved your life, someone grasped your hand and made the resurrection real for you, or maybe you are searching to find such a hand today. If so, I'll gladly offer you mine, and others here will too. Easter is not just a day, it's a life, your life and mine, drawing from the wellsprings of people just like us who took the Jesus story to heart.

Jesus is risen! I believe this, but not because someone else says so. I believe it, because I have risen too. That's the real story of this day and the Christian life. Unfortunately, too much of the Jesus story get's stuck on the cross, too much of Holy Week is about the suffering of Jesus, too much of Easter dwells on the empty tomb, too much of the Christian year rehearses the crucifixion.

Traditionalist Christianity, the Christianity that prides itself on keeping us tied to the "dead faith of the living" moves on from Easter to embrace the cross and rehearse the crucifixion over and over again. Those who live this way will always be tied to the bones of Jesus, rather than the life of Jesus. Easter is not about

the power of dead faith; it is a celebration of the living faith of the dead—those who have gone before us and been faithful to the essence of Jesus’ resurrecting love. We need to take to heart Canale’s words when he says: “Jesus was somehow so full of God that he experienced the power of the resurrection *before* the resurrection occurred. It was this that gave him the courage to live and speak and act as he did. And ...resurrection is available to us *if* we go to our own inner desert and face ourselves, our demons and God there... There is resurrection in life that is dying to express itself.”

Only someone who has lived the darkness of life and found the dawn can say this. And I say it too. Easter is not about the dead bones of Jesus. If one day they are found and put on display, I will not be in line to see them. I won’t need to go because I am already living Easter, and you are too. I believe all of us are here because we know in our bones that the Easter story is our story too. We have found a way as the woman at the tomb did also... to transform the deep fears of our lives into the radical amazement of living itself.

We have tasted freedom in the lives of others and in Jesus’ life and we have chosen to live with courage in the midst of fear, in the midst of suffering and in the midst of death. As Bishop John Shelby Spong writes “we human beings enter God and Life simultaneously the moment we step beyond our fears and become free.” That’s resurrection, that’s the power of Easter!

The women at the tomb and the people who followed Jesus knew in their bones what it meant to be oppressed by forces beyond their control. Life is not for the fainthearted and neither is resurrection. Resurrection is about radical courage... it’s about the journey from the graves of our lives to the glory of God. Resurrection is more than a course in the basics of life...it’s an experience of the promise of life.

And it begins here, in community, in the gathered community. The disciples had run for their lives...for good reason. So too had the women...they experienced the disorientation of terror and the fear of failure. The community they experienced with Jesus had failed... or had it? On their own it seemed to be true...but they soon realized they were not alone...Jesus lived on in each of them and as the community re-gathered and re-connected the extraordinary became commonplace.

They learned to take risks, they learned to rely on each other when fear felt overwhelming... they learned to share their pain and be transformed by the gift of laughter in the midst of tears. They learned to gather in prayer, to offer praise to God and thanksgiving for one another. They learned that being church was more satisfying than going to church.

They learned to be gentle with one another, to support one another, to forgive one another, and most importantly to love one another. Each time they were honest with one another and humble in the face of failure life happened; resurrection happened! They moved on...one day at a time, and as they went they gathered strength and courage from one another.

They learned that resurrection is more than one experience of grace its many experiences. And each time they felt that grace they knew they had the strength to go on. Grace had greatened them. It reminded them that the quality of life is a measured by the honesty of life, by the sheer gutziness of being humanof being vulnerable and fallible...and redeemable. You can’t learn these things in isolation; you can only learn these things in a community of like-minded soul-searching women and men whose faith is deeper than their fears.

Resurrection is something we practice...day in and day out...with each other. We take risks, we conquer fear, we comfort grief, we offer forgiveness, we tell the truth in love, and we resist despair! Resurrection is something we experience...through laughter and joy and through remembering...remembering what its like to be loved for who we are...to be accepted for who we are, and most of all knowing we are one with a power that is greater and more gracious than any love we have ever known before.

Resurrection is about connection, not isolation and it's about so much more. You know that. On our own we can stumble but with one another we can soar. That is not the final truth. The final truth awaits us all, when life will indeed be all in all. But in the mean time there is time enough to practice resurrection here and now.

The world is changing every day...nanoseconds go by without our knowing quite what to make of all the changes we undergo. We barely have time to remember who we are before life demands we be someone else. Resurrection is not about the past, it's about the now; it is always about moving on, taking hold of life, and never letting go. Why? Because life is just too good and too important to be left graveside.

Jesus is Risen. He is Risen indeed...don't let anything or anyone make you believe otherwise. Practice resurrection, practice hope, and practice love—Let your body be strengthened by joy, your heart be nurtured by hope, and your life be rooted in Easter.

I assure you the real story of Easter makes every day a new day; a day worth living, and a life worth having. Like I said before: no bones about it. Wait a minute... that's not quite true, is it? Easter is about your bones...and my bones being strengthened by joy and steadied by hope so that all of us together can walk and live in the promise of Easter life. Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. Amen.