

# A Progressive Easter

Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8 Acts 10:34-43  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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For those of you who may be visiting today, or are not very familiar with of the kind of church that College Hill is, let me try to summarize it in a nutshell. **Our approach to faith and Christianity, while rooted in the Reformed tradition, is one of openness, inclusiveness and exploration.**

In striving to embrace and celebrate diversity, **we do not dictate what a person has to believe in order to find full fellowship in this community of faith.** Everyone is encouraged, therefore, to bring their own personal perspectives, questions and doubts. And if they so choose, to engage in thoughtful and respectful dialogue with others.

Being progressive, and by that I mean being open to considering new ideas and understandings, especially around issues like biblical interpretation and theological doctrines, is always challenging, and yes, often a bit threatening – especially to traditional religious institutionalism. We are not unaware that Jesus was crucified because, in part, he was perceived as a threat to the traditional religious institutionalism of his day.

But what does any of this have to do with Easter? Well, I guess I'm saying all this as a kind of a disclaimer as to what is going to follow.

Twelve years ago I was interviewing for the position of pastor at Bethany Presbyterian Church in Dallas, a "More Light Presbyterian" congregation like this one. One of the people on the Pastor Nominating Committee, a church elder who also happened to be the Music Director, asked me the following question: **Would you have a problem with someone in this congregation who doesn't believe in the literal bodily resurrection of Jesus?**

My initial response was, "The fact that you're asking that question leads me to think that there are indeed people in this congregation who don't believe that, perhaps even among this committee." They had a good hearty laugh at my astute, and accurate, observation.

Then I said something like, "Though I consider myself fairly progressive, I personally have no reason not to believe in the stories of the resurrection from a traditional historical perspective. But that's mainly because I've haven't been presented with anything yet that has convinced me of any other alternative interpretation." To that I added, "But no, I would not have a problem with

someone who didn't believe the traditional interpretation." That was the beginning of nine very good years there as their pastor.

As it turned out, they told me that an interim pastor, from about a decade before, told that congregation in an Easter sermon that anyone who did not believe in a literal bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead wasn't a Christian. When I heard that, I shared that from my perspective **requiring the scriptures to be interpreted literally should never be used as litmus test to judge whether someone else was a Christian or not. I said that then, and say that now, because I don't believe that God uses that criteria.**

But just like me twelve years ago, **perhaps you have not been exposed to why anyone would even consider not taking the resurrection stories literally.** So even though this may be a bit risky for an Easter sermon, that is what I would like to do today. I do this not to be intentionally controversial, or to change your own understanding, but to make the point that **the process of being progressive and inclusive always leads us into new territory, if only for our consideration.**

In preparing for this sermon I have re-read a remarkable book that I know some of you have read as well. It's entitled **Resurrection: Myth or Reality?** This book was written in 1994 by the decidedly progressive Episcopal Bishop of Newark, New Jersey, **John Shelby Spong**, who has spent a good portion of his ministry career trying to pull the church back from rampant fundamentalism, and to help lead the church into what many are describing as **a new emerging Christian paradigm**, one on the scale and scope of the Reformation itself, 500 years ago.

While biblical literalists call his book on the resurrection heresy, I find that it explains in a profound way where many twenty first-century Christians - perhaps even myself - are headed in their understanding of their faith.

**Throughout this book Spong answers this provocative question of whether the Resurrection stories are myth or reality this way: Both! The resurrection is both a myth and a reality!** Since I am unable to do justice in trying to paraphrase Spong's words, the words you will hear now in the remainder of this sermon (again, which I offer if for only your careful consideration), are those of Bishop Spong. [Bold emphasis mine.]

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The subject of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth lies at the foundation of Christianity itself. It was the experience that came to be called Easter that propelled the Christian movement into history.

**I still assert with deep conviction that my understanding of Christianity is rooted firmly in the reality of Easter. My faith in Jesus' resurrection, however, does not today demand that I claim a literalness for the words I use to talk about that resurrection.**

**I do maintain, however, that the effects of that experience called Easter are demonstrably objective and real.** For what lies behind our religious systems, our holy words, our power claims, and even behind our fears is an experience that transforms, deepens, and calls us into what theologian Paul Tillich has called “the new being.” It is that experience which demands of us an openness, a probing, questioning mind, a capacity to process willingly every new bit of data, and most significant of all, a yearning to be led into what the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel called “the abundant life.”

**For me “Jesus is Lord.” Jesus is my way to enter the experience of God, and the story of Easter is the story of that point of entry.** Easter, for me, is eternal, subjective, mythological, nonhistorical, and nonphysical. Yet Easter is also something real for me.

**How can something real be nonphysical, nonhistorical?** The usual contrasting words *spiritual* and *physical*, *historical* and *nonhistorical*, *objective* and *subjective* are, in my opinion, far too empty and shallow to bear the freight I wish them to carry.

**I explore new territory as a believing Christian who will not literalize the details of my faith story.** I also do it as one who yearns for the church to be alive, vibrant, reformed, not defensive to uphold the indefensible, but once again able to see itself as the community through which God can be known and Jesus can be acknowledged. Is this an impossible, audacious, even arrogant dream? Probably.

That which we Christians call the Easter moment was an experience that certain first-century people had in some form with the life of a first-century Jewish man named Jesus of Nazareth. A description of that actual experience was written nowhere. **We have only stories, symbols, and folklore that interpret the experience and describe the effects of the Easter moment.**

Jesus was crucified. He died. He was buried. Then the conviction grew that God had raised him in some way from the dead. Beyond these basic assertions, which were made with enormous power, every other detail is debated, even in the Bible itself.

To dismiss these familiar biblical details as legendary does not end our search for the truth of what happened, it only drives us to another level where we ask a different question.

What happened that gave birth to the legendary details that gathered around the moment of Easter? Why did they gather? Hundreds of millions of people have lived and died on this earth - some of them famous, powerful people - and no similar legends gathered around them. Why this one man, at this time, in this place? Who was and who is Jesus of Nazareth? Why did the events that occurred after his death possess such power?

**What could account for dramatic changes such as transformed lives, the lifting of despair, new courage, the redefinition of God, new worship patterns?** What happened that caused people to begin to say of Jesus of Nazareth, with awesome conviction, that "death cannot contain him! We have seen the Lord"? No one can finally do anything other than speculate! **Ultimately one comes to a point in this search where one must say either yes or no to Jesus, and yes or no to the ultimate significance of his life. That line is drawn, and we must decide whether we will step over it in faith or, by refusing to step over, turn and walk away from this tradition.**

**Speculation about what happened cannot replace the conviction that something real transpired. Yet, if accepting the resurrection narratives as historically literal were the requirement of belief as a Christian, then I would sadly leave my house of faith.** With me in that exodus from the Christian church, however, would be every ranking New Testament scholar in the world. These are scholars of great personal integrity. They do not literalize the Easter narratives, but they also do not abandon the worship of Jesus as their Lord. Neither do I. There is no exodus of this group from the Christian church because we are convinced that the reality of Easter is not captured in the words of the developing Christian legends.

**We can reject the literal narratives about the resurrection and still not reject the truth and power of the resurrection event itself.** That is the distinction that must be made. We would not have the legends unless there had been a moment so indescribable that legends became necessary to explain it. We would not have an Easter tradition unless there had been an experience so real that earthbound words could not capture it.

**For me the Gospel traditions are pointers toward the truth. They are not the truth themselves. Our great failing was that we did not know anything about how Jewish writers wrote, so we literalized narratives that were not intended to be literalized.**

**The Jerusalem Easter legends are not to be dismissed as untrue. They are meant to be probed for clues.** Behind the legends that grew up around

this moment, there is a reality I can never deny. Jesus lives. I have seen the Lord. By that faith and with that conviction I live my life and proclaim my gospel. I have dismissed many of the later-written details of Easter as legends, but I continue to cling to the core experience that inspired that legend.

When I come to describe what actually happened on the first Easter, I find that I can talk about the **effects** that Easter had, the **power** it produced, the **changes** it wrought, the **context** in which it was experienced, and the **results** it created. But the moment itself? About that I discover that I am reduced to a profound, reverential silence. **That moment was beyond the capacity of our language to capture or of our minds to understand. One has only to stand before that transcendent moment, containing that which the church has called the resurrection of Jesus, and there utter only a simple yes or no.**

In that silence I speak my yes, and then I seek to live into the power of that resurrection in my life. Words fail me. Silence engulfs me. I peer beyond the limits in which my life is lived, and I say my prayerful yes...

**Yes to Jesus** - my primary window into God;

**Yes to resurrection** - which asserts that the essence of Jesus is the essence of a living God;

**Yes to life after death** - because one who has entered a relationship with God has entered the timelessness of God.

Out of these affirmations I will live, I will love, and I will enter life deeply. To live life abundantly, not to explain it, is my task and, I believe, the task of the Christ in this world and therefore the task of that group of people who dare to call themselves the body of Christ.

**So let us live. Today we are alive and it is our vocation to be alive - to be alive to God, alive to each other, alive to ourselves. Let us live in expectant hope that where the crucified/risen one is, there will we someday be. That is quite enough for me.**

Amen.

Resource:

John Shelby Spong, *Resurrection: Myth or Reality?*, HarperCollins Publisher, 1994