

*Resurrection Responses*

Matthew 28

A sermon by Pastor Wayne Ibara

Makiki Christian Church

April 16, 2006 Easter

Today we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. But what is it, really, that we celebrate? We often hear people of faith insist that Jesus rose bodily, physically, not just spiritually. And this is in fact what Christian faith has declared. But we are not talking about the resuscitation of a dead body. We are not talking about Jesus coming back to life after an extended “Near Death Experience.” No, the resurrection of Jesus was physical, but it was also the beginning of a new order of life—resurrection life—the heavenly life that God desires for all of us, and for all people.

What this also means is that the resurrection is not simply an event in the past that we remember; in its most important meaning for us, it also points forward to the future: *our future*. As a famous theologian (Karl Rahner) once put it, *The Resurrection means that the beginning of glory has already started*. And that glory is our destiny as God’s people.

In the meantime, however, just as in the Gospels, the resurrection receives varied responses. Two thousand years ago, a different story began circulating about the resurrection. Jesus didn’t rise from the dead, the story went. The disciples took the body. The disciples made up the story. *Faith created the resurrection*; it’s all a hoax. Matthew 28 records the very first conspiracy theory about the resurrection, and conspiracy theories have been popular ever since.

Next month throughout much of the world, in fact, another conspiracy theory that relates to the resurrection is going to get huge publicity. Next month the movie *The Da Vinci Code* is going to be released. Here is the way the book explains Christian faith:

*“...(The Roman Emperor) Constantine needed to strengthen the new Christian tradition, and held a famous ecumenical gathering known as the Council of Nicaea...At this gathering...many aspects of Christianity were debated and voted upon—the date of Easter, the role of the bishops, the administration of the sacraments, and, of course, the divinity of Jesus...*

*“My dear...until that moment in history, Jesus was viewed by His followers as a mortal prophet...a great and powerful man, but a man nonetheless. A mortal.”*

*“Not the Son of God?”*

*“Right...Jesus’ establishment as ‘the Son of God’ was officially proposed and voted on by the Council of Nicaea” (three centuries after his crucifixion). (The Da Vinci Code, p. 233.)*

Of course, *The Da Vinci Code* is fiction. But author Dan Brown purports that *All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and secret rituals in this novel are accurate*. This rather general claim—which has received a great deal of criticism by experts from various fields—gives the impression that nonetheless, *The Da Vinci Code* is onto something real. And part of that veiled allegation is that the church is based on a lie. That *faith created the resurrected Christ*.

So on this Resurrection Day, with the world on the verge of being plunged into a media frenzy over the movie version of this novel, let’s look at some facts, rather than fiction.

There are quite a few books and internet websites that have come out to quite effectively rebut the claims of *The Da Vinci Code*. The novel weaves together so many falsehoods along with facts and partial facts that it takes book-length rebuttals to do justice to the issues raised. For example, take the Council of Nicea that is the flashpoint of Jesus’ divinity for Dan Brown. There was a Council of Nicea convened by the Emperor Constantine. Jesus’ divinity was a key issue. But the issue wasn’t to turn a mortal prophet into the Son of God. Nicea continued a lengthy and public church wrestling with the identity of Jesus, based on the Scriptures. From the very start, the divinity of Jesus was obvious to the church. The question for Nicea was, how do we understand that Jesus could be both fully God and fully man? How do we do justice to the whole biblical witness to who Jesus was? Dan Brown’s characters know little of the Bible or church history.

The truth is that the church didn’t *erase* the humanity of Jesus; the church *preserved* that humanity because of the conviction that whatever Jesus did not assume of our humanity, he could not save.

And if we just look at Matthew’s account of the resurrection, I think there is something quite unexpected in it that further demonstrates how bogus *The Da Vinci Code* conspiracy really is. This has to do with the surprising appearance of *doubt* in the disciples, even after they witness the resurrected Jesus.

It is quite common for critics of traditional Christian faith to refer to the Gospels as propaganda that cannot be trusted. These documents, it is alleged, are not objective, historical reports, but faith-based propaganda intended to persuade. And to an extent, this is true. The Gospels are not objective historical accounts as we today would judge that kind of literature. The Gospels were written, as John’s Gospel openly declares, “in order that you may believe.” But this is not to say that they are written falsely, to advance a horrific lie. As the

Apostle Paul declares, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...and we are to be pitied more than all (people)” (1 Corinthians 15:17, 19).

But this is why some, even in the church, say that the important thing is *faith*. The resurrection story is truly important because *faith* triumphs. And if we have enough *faith*, that is the real issue. Again, from a different angle, the same message: *faith created the resurrection*.

But I believe that this is a false hope. If all Easter means is that it is up to us to muster this wondrous kind of faith that can believe something we really don't believe is true or really happened, I can't see what there is to celebrate. The resurrection is not about human faith creating some romantic story about a dead man coming to life in the minds and hearts of those who loved him. It is the church's most ancient proclamation: Christ died. Then God raised him up on the third day. And we are witnesses. And it is the nature of these witnesses' responses that I find compelling, and to which I want to turn. Because I believe that the almost child-like honesty of the Gospels in describing the first responses of the disciples to the resurrection undercuts any conspiracy claim that the story was made up. If you want to snow somebody, this is not the way to do it.

Our text describes several contrasting responses to the resurrection of Jesus. There is the fear, joy and worship of the women. (At other times I've mentioned how significant it is that all four Gospels place women first at the empty tomb, because women in that day were not accepted as witnesses.) There is the denial, disbelief and cover-up of the guards and priests. But what I want to focus on is the reaction of the disciples. Because they react with worship, but also with *doubt*. Look at verse 17. It is quite amazing and unexpected in what it describes. As the angel and Jesus have both declared, Jesus is to meet his disciples in Galilee. They go there, to a place familiar to their ministry. And Jesus is there.

*When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted*, says the New International Version. The original language suggests something even more dramatic, that not only did “some” doubt, but *all of them* felt this way. As New Testament professor Donald Hagner translates the verse, *And when they saw him, they worshiped him, but they doubted*.

The word translated as “doubt” is a rare word in the New Testament. It is used only by Matthew, and then only twice. And guess where the other occurrence is. It is in the story of Peter's walk on the water! Remember that? Jesus comes to his disciples on the Sea of Galilee. There is a storm. Peter is impulsive and bold enough to cry out, “Lord, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says, “Come!”

And Peter does walk on water, briefly, but then is overcome by fear and begins to sink. Jesus grabs him and then says, “You of little faith, why did you *doubt?*”

The word doesn’t mean Peter had no faith; in fact, he was the only one of the disciples to venture out *in* faith that day. The word means to hesitate, to be double-minded. It describes Peter’s mixed success and failure on the water, and it’s also used to describe some, if not all of the disciples after they see the Risen Jesus! Is this how you would think of persuading others of the resurrection who were *not* witnesses themselves?

I remember a Junior Miss competition on Kauai, where the interview question asked of the participants was, “If you could be transported to any time and place in history, where and when would you choose, and why?” Great question. And one of the contestants gave this answer: I would choose to go back in time to Jesus’ day, so I could meet and hear Jesus for myself.

Perhaps all Christians have had such a thought. But here’s the amazing truth. Even if we *had* been there, even if we *had been* first-hand witnesses, we wouldn’t necessarily nor automatically be beyond doubt or uncertainty in our trust of Jesus! Even the disciples, after the resurrection, experienced doubts. And it isn’t just Matthew’s Gospel that testifies to this. Read the resurrection accounts closely and you will detect the same awkward and surprising hints in Luke and John. It wasn’t that the disciples had this amazing kind of faith that could create the resurrection out of thin air. The disciples had no faith in any kind of resurrection. The resurrection breathed life—and one is tempted to say even a kind of reluctant life—into the disciples’ demoralized condition. *Faith did not create the resurrection story. The resurrection inspired faith.*

What is truly amazing is that in spite of the doubts of his disciples, Jesus entrusts the Good News to them. In our Gospel this morning, there isn’t even the tiniest pause between this surprising statement—*but they doubted*—and Jesus’ *Great Commission!* You might think that after registering this hesitation and doubt, maybe Jesus would have first taken them aside, sat them down, maybe done one or two miracles just to remind them of who he really was, *and then* sent them off. But no, immediately in the next verses the Great Commission comes. Why? How is it possible?

It’s possible because the resurrection of Jesus is so powerful that it can bear even the doubts of its most important witnesses. Because the fulfillment of the Great Commission is less dependent on the fitness of the messengers and ultimately dependent entirely on the authority and the ability of the one who sends them out. Jesus says, *All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me. Therefore go...*”

It's not because the disciples or any of Jesus' followers since had passed the course with flying colors that they are fit for the mission he gives to them. It is not because we have been so transformed that we can "do the job" at last. No, the success of this mission depends entirely on the authority of Jesus, Lord of heaven and earth, and upon his promise that concludes Matthew's Gospel: *And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.*

So what might this mean for us? For me, it is Good News wrapped up in amazingly great tidings of joy. To expand on the quote I began with this morning, *Easter is not the celebration of a past event. The alleluia is not for what was; Easter proclaims a beginning which has already decided the remotest future. The Resurrection means that the beginning of glory has already started.* The truly good news of Resurrection Sunday looks to the future, not the past. And it is our future. *If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

But in the meantime, the resurrection is very good news to me because it is entirely dependent on God's sovereignty, not my ability to believe something absolutely that my mind cannot truly comprehend. The resurrection is strong enough to bear my frail, human doubts. Man, I love that about the Good News. I think I've made Lewis Smedes my unofficial patron saint. He was professor of ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary, but much more well-known for a string of amazing books that minted down the high-falluting thoughts of seminary into a currency that ordinary people could cash in on. He was the most inspiring preacher I have ever heard. And, come to think of it, in the way that he wrestled so honestly with the doubt in his faith, he would have fit right in with the 12 disciples. (And if he had been one of the Twelve, the New Testament would be an even more amazing literary collection, believe me.)

This is how Lewis Smedes described his faith in one of the first books he wrote (*How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?*):

*If you are trying hard to believe in God while a hundred voices inside tell you to stop believing, you are my kind of person...*

*Believing does not come easy for me either. It never has come easy; I suppose it never will. I almost always believe in God in spite of problems and pains that tell me things are so wrong that believing in a good God doesn't make sense...*

*...God does not do many miracles for my crowd,* Smedes confessed. Too many of those he knew died too soon or had marriages fall apart or children go through painful times. But that was only the tip of the iceberg. Dr. Smedes could never forget about the starvation of countless children and the oppression of countless people.

*...I believe that God really cares,* he wrote. It's just that *I feel a lot of hurts that tell me he does not seem to care enough.*

*Faith does not break loose in my head with a whooping, "Hurrah for God!" Believing sneaks into my soul while my mind is saying, "My God, where were you when I needed you?"*

*I am talking about real believing, the kind you do with your deepest self, down where your primeval feelings flow. The thinking part is not all that hard...It is the feeling part that comes hard, the part that lets you know in the deep places of your soul that it is all right even when your head tells you everything is ghastly.*

Lewis Smedes wasn't thinking about Easter when he wrote these words, but I think he was describing real Resurrection faith. And I think it's the kind of faith the church needs today, and the world needs from the church today.

We celebrate the resurrection not because everything has already been made right, but because the beginning of glory has started.

We celebrate the resurrection not because it is *our* creation nor the creation of any people, but because it is God's sovereign act. The resurrection is not validated by our fervency of faith. Indeed, it is strong enough to bear our doubts.

It is God's declaration: death is defeated. Christ is victor. Alleluia! Thanks be to God.